BATTING FOR IDENTITY POLITICS

HOMECOMING OF THE GODS

IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT CITY

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WHY C✋NGRESS IS ESSENTIAL FOR INDIA AND HOW IT CAN BE REVIVED

by SHASHI THAROOR

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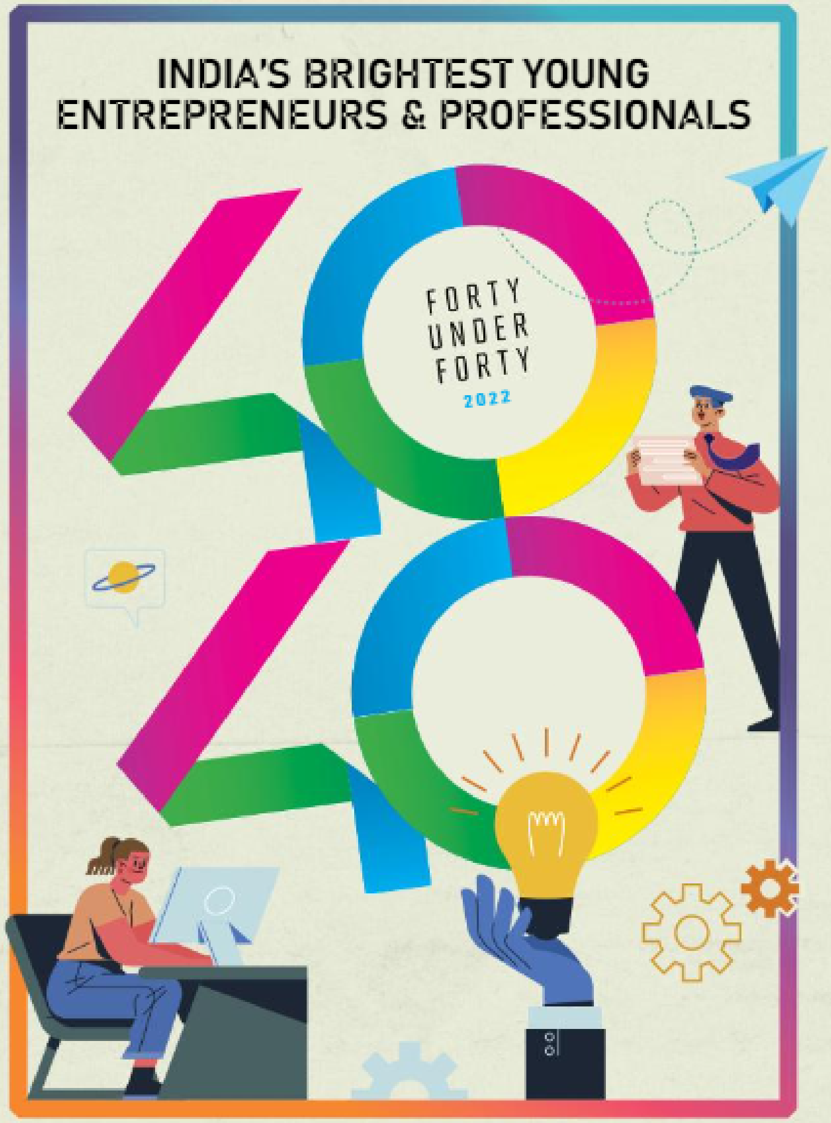
INDIA'S BRIGHTEST YOUNG
ENTREPRENEURS & PROFESSIONALS
40
40
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UNDER
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2022

Fortune India's 40 Under 40 issue is an annual feature where we identify 40 most promising young Entrepreneurs & Corporate honchos under the age of 40, in India across all disciplines. Fortune India invites nominations from potential contenders & industry leaders, which are further shortlisted by the jury & winners identified.

ON STANDS APRIL 2022

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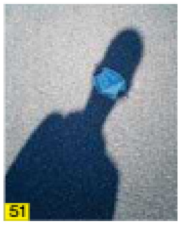

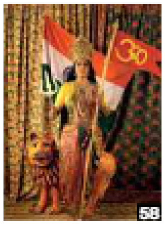

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

The resounding success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in four of the five Assembly elections that concluded recently once again proved the charismatic leadership of our "unstoppable" Prime Minister Narendra Modi ('The Mind of the Permanent Winner' by MJ Akbar, March 28, 2022). Despite the repeated electoral losses and eroding strength of Congress in several states, it is still unlikely that there will be any change in the party's top brass. The reason seems to be that any change at the top would inevitably disintegrate the Grand Old Party. No leader other than the Gandhis would ever be acceptable to helm the party despite unified protest during the occasional 'G23' meetings. No one in the party has the courage to challenge the present leadership. But no change at the top means no change in the party's fate. The Aam Aadmi Party, on the other hand, looks like a formidable force if it tactically enters into a pre-poll alliance with Trinamool Congress and other regional parties. Even though the alliance would not be robust enough to stop BJP from returning to power in 2024, it could well reduce the victory margin of the saffron party and thus obstruct the government at every step. However, the government should not risk introducing financial reforms in haste as it could result in hardships for the common man and help the opposition capitalise on and translate it into political brownie points. The government should rather proceed cautiously and strategise some long-term policies. Enthusiasm with restraint could well be invigorating while overenthusiasm could be disruptive.

Jaideep Mittra

WHITHER CONGRESS?

Congress has seldom faced such an electoral humiliation as it did in the recently held Assembly elections in five states in which it was reduced to a wafer-thin minority ('The Grand Delusion', March 28, 2022). Congress today is surviving only because of its brand, but its popularity is at its lowest ebb. The party is plagued by infighting and internal differences, and the leadership is unable to control them. What it needs right now is a collective and inclusive leadership, organisation polls, decision-making at all levels and an open dialogue with like-minded parties. Democracy cannot survive without a strong opposition.

MY Shariff

KASHMIR TRUTHS

Vivek Agnihotri's latest film, *The Kashmir Files*, ticks all the right boxes—the subject is important, the facts presented are well-researched and the film itself is compelling enough to make a lasting impression ('Kashmir on the National Mind', March 28, 2022). It makes the audience confront uncomfortable truths and induces it to find out more about the dreadful events leading to what eventually happened in Kashmir in the 1990s. The exodus should be remembered as a blot on humanity. It should be a collective endeavour of the people of this country so that something similar does not happen again.

Shivakti Jaiswal

THE CENTENARY OF GANDHI'S TRIAL
OPEN
UNSTOPPABLE

BRAND OF PASSION

The Indian Premier League (IPL) has cemented its place and has become an integral part of Indian cricket ('Pride and Passion' by Boria Majumdar, March 28, 2022). It has opened up new opportunities for players who otherwise would not have got a chance to showcase their potential. However, the competition is stiff and many players struggled to retain their places in the top 11 in the subsequent seasons.

Vasudevan

By S PRASANNARAJAN

PUTIN'S APOLOGISTS

IDEOLOGY TRUMPS MORALITY. Or a war can bring back the uses of the enemy to the conversation. It is as if the international mobilisation against Putin's war on Ukraine must be challenged by the counter-moralists still haunted by the old ghosts of ideology and by those who find common cause with the imperial motivations and the "de-Nazification" project of the Russian autocrat. In the rhetorical theatre of war, global sentimentalism over the human cost of Russia's invasion is an apology for isolating a country whose transition from an empire to a nation doesn't follow the West's playbook of democracy. Seen through the dissenter's prism, the aggressor, a convenient stereotype, is a victim of liberal democracy's post-Cold War triumphalism, and his sense of hurt and his nation's transborder fears remain incomprehensible to his accusers.

For the ideological harrumpher, the remains of the Soviet empire are a site of lingering injustice: In the great power struggle of the 20th century, the winner epitomised imperial arrogance. The anti-Americanism of the Left, new or old, was matched in its intensity by the persuasive power of their inner Soviet Union. The socialist ideals on which it was built were too strong to be made redundant by the terror reign of their unelected custodians. What they missed after the disintegration of the empire was an ideological homeland where the sense of social fairness outweighed the excesses of the apparatus. The anti-imperialists desperately needed action heroes, underdogs who fought alone.

The heroes were not all Castros. They were not all picture-perfect revolutionaries living up to Che's romance. They were all Chávez and other variations of victimhood. They held aloft the flag of anti-Americanism even while they built the biggest prisons for those who dared to ask questions. Their suppression of democratic impulses was a necessary action to preserve the spirit of resistance against the American Evil. The Left's portrait of ideological despotism as an anti-imperial system found its most fulfilling—and appalling for those who have not lost faith in the possibilities of humanity—moment when Saddam Hussein, from his Baathist bunkers, resisted American missiles. What the dissident Iraqi writer Kanan Makiya called the Republic of Fear became the battlefield of imperial overreach, and Saddam a neo-Nebuchadnezzar of anti-American valour. The Saddamisation of the mind was as useful as the Stalinisation of the mind.

Along came Putin, the besieged nationalist pitted against the West with its anti-Russian alliances, the only safekeeper of a reawakening nation's scarred pride. For anti-imperialism's leftist legion, his daring is a necessary defiance, a rejoinder to the hollow idealism of the free world and its leader. Putin may not be missing communism, even though he is trained by it, but every action of the permanently aggrieved orphan of the Great Alternative speaks of a craving for the expansiveness of the nobler imperium. His Eurasian vision is a Soviet fantasy updated by nationalism, a paranoid expression of his faith in the mission history, not the version written by the winners, has entrusted him with. His war in Ukraine, the wayward Slavic sibling, is nothing more than a warning against the wages of Westernisation. Putinistas of the Left find in his War of the One anti-Americanism's boldest defence—a war made inevitable by the insensitivity of those who claim to have won the clash of ideologies.

The endorsement of Putin by the Left, relentless in its mythification of rogues as the last anti-Americans fighting for the cause, has got an unlikely companion. For the far right, Putin exudes nationalism's muscular charisma. His rhetorical position that the war is essential for the de-Nazification of Ukraine is gaining acceptance among ultra-nationalists and haunted leftists. When he invokes the de-Nazification project, he is mythicising himself as the natural inheritor of the Great Russian who sacrificed the most to save the world from the Nazis. Putin's war manual may be a replica of Hitler's, but his war has brought together the ultra-right and the anti-imperial left as joint custodians of a revisionist morality in which the tragedy of Ukraine is an abstraction. Putin's war crimes become a justifiable defence of an isolated nationalist with Soviet nostalgia.

The real hero of this war shows the power of the street, and talks, in the colloquial eloquence of a citizen-ruler of the social media age, while looking straight into global conscience. After the grand ideologies and their colossal apostles, the time has come for the little man, the unshaven president in a tee, to stand up for the big ideas of freedom. Fighting from the rubble of his country, he cannot afford arguments about good and evil, but only a plea for life. Those who are blinded by ideologies alone miss such heroism. ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta

A SINGLE FILM HAS been known to set trends in fashion or even change popular culture. However, I cannot think of a film that has changed the political narrative. I am, of course, referring to the phenomenal impact of Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* which has apparently netted more than ₹100 crore in box office receipts, and which is still playing to packed halls all over the country.

I was witness to this dramatic shift during a Rajya Sabha debate on Jammu and Kashmir.

The ethnic cleansing—I prefer this term to "genocide" which has a more specific and bloody meaning—of Hindus from the Kashmir Valley in January 1990 has been a feature of a longstanding debate on the flawed nature of Indian secularism. I recall writing on the subject at various points since the 1990s. However, this tragedy was always treated by the then secular mainstream as a sad but fringe phenomenon. Despite the acknowledgement of the excesses resulting from the secessionist uprising that resulted in the administration losing control of the Valley for at least a week, the whole incident was shrouded in denial—just as the Godhra train tragedy was a decade later. With only BJP expressing outrage, clever secular spin doctors made it out that the exodus had somehow been masterminded by Governor Jagmohan who was hastily appointed by the VP Singh government after the Farooq Abdullah government collapsed amid the mounting insurgency. Indeed, Jagmohan was transformed into the real villain of the piece.

According to the secular narrative, invoking the ethnic cleansing of the Pandits was inimical to applying the healing touch and dousing the flames of *azadi*.

Now, *The Kashmir Files* has forced a reassessment.

In Rajya Sabha, there was the interesting sight of Congress fielding a Kashmiri Pandit—albeit an MP from Chhattisgarh—as its lead speaker. Vivek Tankha, an accomplished lawyer, spoke from the heart when he spelt out the injustice to his community for the past three decades. It didn't really matter that what Tankha spoke was significantly at variance with what the Congress ecosystem believes—that invoking the Kashmiri Pandit issue is a ruse to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment. What was significant was that Congress felt it necessary to address the issue and appear sympathetic to a dispossessed community whose plight had belatedly shaken the conscience of a very large part of middle-class India.

What made the difference was *The Kashmir Files*. It wasn't the violence in the film, including the depiction of a cold-blooded massacre of Pandits by a separatist leader who was also a darling of the ultra-liberal fringe. There has been worse violence in films centred on Nazi atrocities during World War II. What has really shaken audiences is the starkness of the venom poured on the Hindus in the Valley, the menacing bigotry of the separatists and the open threats to convert, flee or be killed. It wasn't some masked men who terrorised an entire community but known men, including neighbours and former students, who now got it into their heads that the presence of every Hindu was cancerous and had to be dealt with by surgery. Earlier, Indian censors were hypersensitive to what was to be allowed to be shown to the audience. In the case of *The Kashmir Files*, the censors shed all inhibitions and gave the filmmaker near-absolute artistic freedom to be realistic.

The larger political context shouldn't be ignored. Occasionally, there appears a book, a song or a film that captures the mood of the times. *The Kashmir Files* corresponds to the wider acceptance of a larger growth of Hindu identity that goes beyond the household puja room and big festivals. Part of this emerging identity has been occasioned by national pride and the easy acceptance of the Hindu underpinnings of Indian civilisation. Another part, however, is born of victimhood and the realisation that over the years, the absence of Hindu assertiveness has also damaged national interests—as happened in the Kashmir Valley in 1990. The profound sense of sublimated victimhood—which politics helped bring to the surface—was equally in evidence during the movement for the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Now, *The Kashmir Files* has highlighted the warped priorities and the sham liberalism (so well depicted by the activist professor who is hand-in-glove with the terrorists in the Kashmir Valley) that led to people looking the other way in 1990, simply because the issue centred on the plight of a small community of Hindus. In today's India, this won't happen again. ■

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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

Island of Despair

MANY SRI LANKAN families fleeing hunger and extreme economic distress have landed on the southern Indian coast of Tamil Nadu following perilous and illegal boat journeys. Elsewhere in the world, this is typically a last-ditch effort by people escaping military invasions or civil unrest, the way we have seen Syrian refugees cling on to overcrowded dhows and small vessels to reach parts of Europe in what is often seen as a suicidal trip. In Lanka, there is no war at the moment, but there is a war-like situation with angry crowds hitting the road protesting gross shortage of everything from food items, essential provisions and fuel, with Covid upsetting its economy and tourism dollars drying up during the lockdown. Internal violence and perceptions about religious fissures also accentuated the crisis.

Writer Ajay Kamalakaran was in Jaffna, in north-eastern Sri Lanka, recently for a wedding. As a regular visitor to the island nation where he has close buddies and family friends with whom his family celebrates New Year, he was shocked to see armed soldiers at fuel stations this time around. "This economic crisis has affected people from every walk of society. You see fancy sedans and SUVs in queues for petrol and diesel, while middle class people wait in serpentine lines for cooking gas, and the poor, with large cans in hand, patiently bear the heat with the hope of getting some kerosene. Factory owners are frustrated with the daily-changing power-cut schedule as they often face a situation where workers sit idle," Kamalakaran talks of his recent visit to the country where people are battling an abject poverty-like situation.

In Sri Lanka, food inflation has soared to 25.7 per cent with the prices of essentials, including milk, skyrocketing. With queues for essential services getting longer, the government had to call in the army to replace the police forces at department stores and other delivery centres fearing public wrath

Of course, this isn't the first time the people of India's southern neighbour have been down on their luck and struggling to get back on their feet. The decades-long civil war starting from 1983 that ended with the decimation of the Tamil Tiger forces (LTTE) in 2009 amidst charges of war crimes and unprecedented horror is proof of the trauma that the nation had gone through. Long-time President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who is now prime minister, had earned the credit for battering the Tamil Tigers, a feat that also made him a hero among the Sinhalese majority in the country. He also won applause worldwide for crushing a dreaded extremist organisation that was thought to be invincible. In the aftermath, Rajapaksa acquired a halo as a triumphant Sinhalese nationalist and went about what many analysts call vanity projects to turn his country into an economic powerhouse by borrowing heavily from China. Voices against him and his excesses during that period and before, including those from the media, were extinguished with extreme bias. The killing of journalist Lasantha Wickrematunge in January 2009 was seen as a warning to anyone who dared take on the new rulers of Sri Lanka who steered the nation during and after the war. The current president and younger brother of Mahinda Rajapaksa, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was the defence secretary, came under attack for trying to brush war crimes of their dispensation under the carpet.

Thirteen years later, a period that saw the Rajapaksas in power except for briefly, the country is struggling with what economists call the twin challenge of servicing massive debt as well as meeting domestic needs.

Former IMF economist Sergi Lanau, who is now the deputy chief economist in the economic research department of The Institute of International Finance (IIF), a trade group for the global financial services industry, has been warning about the Sri Lankan economic crisis for a long time now. In an interview to *Open* on what exactly led to the unprecedented situation in Sri Lanka, he doesn't want to speak about "vanity projects" launched by the Rajapaksas with Chinese assistance, but offers a stunning analysis. "Sri Lanka issued external bonds and borrowed from official lenders like China for years to finance current account deficits. These deficits arose from loose economic policies. While tourism revenue was high, investors thought Sri Lanka was a

REUTERS

Soldiers of the Sri Lankan army stand guard at a filling station in Colombo, March 22, 2022

good credit risk. When tourism evaporated in the Covid crisis, the government ran out of financing options. At that point, the only way to avoid losing international reserves fast would have been higher interest rates and less public spending. The government decided to not tighten policies and hoped tourism would recover fast, but things didn't go well."

Raw data reveal the extent of the problem at hand. Sri Lanka's public debt is estimated to have risen from 94 per cent in 2019 to 119 per cent of its GDP in 2021. The country, which relies hugely on others, imports many essential items, including petroleum, medicines, food, grains and so on. As it is plagued by inflation, the government doesn't have the money to pay for imports, resulting in a shortage of material for domestic consumption. Scarcity of the foreign currency reflects in the rapid decline of foreign direct investment into Sri Lanka to $548 million in 2020 compared with $793 million in 2019 and $1.6 billion in 2018. In fact, the situation is so bad that the government had to cancel examinations for school students due to scarcity of printing paper, which is also imported. A Reuters report said that the government also had to suspend operations at its only fuel refinery because it ran out of crude oil stocks.

Inflation is another scourge facing the country. Food inflation has soared to 25.7 per cent with the prices of essentials, including milk, skyrocketing. With queues for essential services getting longer, the government had to call in the army to replace the police forces at department stores and other delivery centres fearing public wrath.

Kamalakaran, meanwhile, speaks about the resilience of the Sri Lankan commonfolk. "Although there is growing resentment against the government, the average Sri Lankan has shown saint-like patience in dealing with the situation." He however warns, "But with the Tamil and Sinhalese New Year coming up in less than a month, we are likely to see things boil over unless the situation changes dramatically."

This economic meltdown in Sri Lanka is seen as the worst since the country's financial crisis of 1948. As regards the consequences, Lanau notes, "Sri Lanka is in a financial crisis that will likely lead to recession and sharp compression of imports and domestic demand." He also offers some solutions, "At this point, the only viable option is negotiating a package of adjustment policies with official lenders in exchange for loans that will lessen the impact of the crisis. Without any external support, importing enough essential goods will be very hard."

The rest of the world has a lot to learn from the Sri Lankan experience. Lanau points out that many countries have found themselves in similar situations in the past. "For example, Argentina also borrowed heavily in dollars in 2016-18 but did not reduce fiscal deficits and inflation fast enough to sustain market confidence. Turkey has faced similar problems in the last few years."

He goes on, "The main lesson from all these cases is that trying to achieve high economic growth through heavy external borrowing is dangerous. It sometimes works very well but when it fails, the resulting crisis is deep. With a credible plan to adjust economic policies and international support, Sri Lanka will be able to restore stability and have another opportunity to grow sustainably."

But for the time being, the island is in dire straits. ■

By ULLEKH NP

IN MEMORIAM • MADELEINE ALBRIGHT (1937-2022)

HISTORY'S DIPLOMAT

America's first woman secretary of state shaped the 20th century's last world-defining moment

MARIE (OR MARIA) Jana Korbelová lived the American Dream. Born in Prague to a father who would soon be exiled after the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, she emigrated to the US where her family, staunch anti-communists (as they were anti-fascists) who feared returning to communist rule, was granted political asylum. Marie Jana became Maddy, the quintessential American teenager, although that's where her similarity with the average American kid ended. In 1997, she would be confirmed as the 64th and first woman Secretary of State, succeeding Warren Christopher. Together with her baby-boomer president, Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright was history's choice as the top diplomat of the surviving and victorious superpower at the 20th century's last world-defining moment.

As the tributes poured in after her death on March 23 at 84, memories of the good resurfaced along with those of the bad and of the ugly.

First, the good. Albright was, after her family, a ferocious opponent of both of the last century's totalitarian extremes that had destroyed a continent and killed people as never before. The shadow of her past did not stretch merely over the four-plus decades of the Cold War but all the way back to the rise of fascism in Europe. Raised Roman Catholic, Albright found out rather late in the day about her Jewish relatives killed in the Holocaust. She was, therefore, a champion of democracy and individual freedom, and not only in the definitions thrust upon her by her admirers and beneficiaries. The Kosovar Albanians and the Bosnians would testify to that. Albright brought a hawkishness to her worldview and a no-nonsense attitude to dealing with leaders and nations that, in retrospect, is difficult to find substitutes for. The world was coming to terms with the aftermath of the fall of communism and the Soviet collapse, Saddam Hussein had complicated a complex Middle East, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had degenerated from the Oslo Accords to stay suspended between the First and Second Intifadas, Islamism was rearing its head as the new arch-enemy of democracy and the West, the death throes of the war in the former Yugoslavia had become a serialised genocide. Could Albright and her boss have done any better?

The bad. Some things could have been done better. Clinton did not intervene in Yugoslavia at the peak of the violence when it could have saved lives on all sides. Albright at the time was ambassador to the UN. When she drove Clinton to bomb Serbia—a NATO aerial campaign without a UN mandate—it was arguably no longer a necessity and resulted in needless destruction and death. On a bigger scale, Albright failed to undo her predecessor's failure to grasp the opportunities thrown up by the Soviet Union's demise. When a fledgling Russia needed help, and perhaps a little respect, the Clinton administration added fuel to the fire of 'liberal hegemony', trying to remake Russia in America's image. There's a straight line of causality from the humiliation heaped on Moscow to the emergence of Russia's new strongman Vladimir Putin. Closer home, Albright was not only the leading force behind the Clinton administration's sanctions against India after the Pokhran nuclear tests of 1998 but she also, at one point, wanted to internationalise Kashmir. India, of course, also managed to evade her attempts to compel Delhi to sign the CTBT.

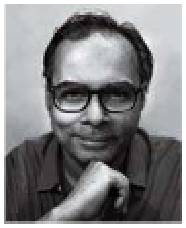
And the ugly. The obverse of her diplomatically poignant insect brooch or snake pin were her less guarded comments, most infamously when Lesley Stahl had asked her on *60 Minutes* in May 1996 if she thought sanctions against Iraq were worth the death of half a million children. She had replied: "I think that is a very hard choice...but the price, we think, the price is worth it." (The clip resurfaced after her death.) Less well-known is her being caught on video yelling at protestors (against the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia) at a book-signing in Prague in 2012: "Disgusting Serbs, get out!"

Madeleine Albright's legacy is some parts heaven and some parts hell. It may not be possible to determine which lot weighs heavier. But what can't be taken away is her place in history—the world we inhabit was in large parts shaped by her choices a little more than 20 years ago. ■

By SUDEEP PAUL

ANGLE

A YEARNING AGAINST EFFICIENCY



On the peculiar opposition to 10-minute food delivery

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

GIVEN INDIA'S LONG tryst against consumers, it is not much of a surprise that Zomato, the food delivery service, got backlash after they announced that they could now get orders into homes within 10 minutes. This would have been welcome in a society that values efficiency. Instead, there has been outrage in both social and traditional media on how this is a bad idea. They have two main arguments as follows: it poses a danger because deliverers would go at breakneck speeds to reach before deadline; and delivery people would be exploited because the number of deliveries would multiply. One article in *Swarajya* termed it an "incredible stupidity" asking whether "instant gratification" of consumers was a good thing. Karti Chidambaram, an MP, tweeted: 'This is absurd! It's going to put undue pressure on the delivery personnel, who are not employees & who have no benefits or security, who have no bargaining power with @zomato I have raised this in Parliament & have written to the Govt. Will pursue this further.'

All these are anticipated demons. They are the worst-case scenarios. Even if the company had not clarified that the delivery personnel would not know that they were making a 10-minute delivery, taking away their incentive to speed, none of these concerns are a given. What will happen is probably what happened in the past to such models cutting down delivery times. It works in the beginning in limited places but once they try to scale, it becomes unfeasible, ending up at the usual average of what roads in India allow. Numerous start-ups based on deliveries have tried and failed to do it in a universal manner. Or it ends up as a disappointing customer experience because the choice of goods on offer is so limited that there is no gratification, solving *Swarajya*'s quibble. The correlation is straight between shortness of the delivery time and funding that the startup is raising. As soon as the tap closes a little, these ambitions are the first to be discarded.

But it still makes it a worthwhile venture to attempt because this is how services become better in the marketplace. To ask for slower delivery is the peculiar idea of not wanting a system to get better—the logic of horses over cars, or going on strike against computerisation of banks. As for labour exploitation, there is no better check than competition. The accusation also glosses over the fact that in the gig economy, more deliveries means more money, not just for the business but also for the labour. When Chidambaram says it is going to put undue pressure on personnel, he is saying that personnel should not have agency to take on that pressure and improve their livelihood. Others must decide how hard they must work. At a not-too-distant future, technology like drones will simply make human deliveries obsolete but until then, at least let the deliverers make as much as they can. ■

IDEAS

GETTY IMAGES

BURNOUT

When the Australian tennis star Ashleigh Barty announced her retirement, at the age of 25, just about two months after she won the Australian Open, the world was stunned. But Barty—not very different from Björn Borg, who too retired in his mid-20s before trying to stage a comeback in the 1990s—isn't the exception. It is the likes of Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer who are. Sport has become an engine of commerce more than ever before, and the expectations on the modern player are immense. There are never any breaks anymore. And it is little wonder that the likes of Naomi Osaka pull out of tournaments citing fatigue or cricketers skip the IPL even when there is much money to be made. Unless sport administrators take this into account, there will be more burnouts and shorter careers. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'So many players hate their sport—the surprise is that so few admit it'

BARRY COWAN

FORMER BRITISH TENNIS PROFESSIONAL

PUNE BEGINS A NEW CHAPTER IN GREEN MOBILITY

India's thrust towards clean mobility partly stems from its overall environmental commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement to reduce greenhouse gases, transition quickly to clean energy, and contribute to the mitigation of the impacts of climate change. A substantial contribution to these goals is expected to come from the reduction of vehicular emissions through cleaner mobility solutions. Additionally, alternately fuelled mobility such as electric vehicles (EVs), hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, and biofuels presents economic and social benefits such as substantially lower fuel import costs. This has created an element of inevitability to the transition from conventional fossil fuel-based transportation to alternate fuels in India.

Maharashtra state aims to achieve net-zero at the earliest and recognises the importance of transition to clean transport to achieve this target. Over the last few years, the Government of Maharashtra has laid emphasis on the promotion of next generation industrial segments in the state to support this transition. In 2021, the Government launched a new Electric Vehicle (EV) Policy and has also committed to promote other segments of clean mobility such as biofuels and hydrogen fuel cells.

As a prominent automotive manufacturing destination in the country as well as a significant consumer cluster, these commitments are positioning Maharashtra as a leading destination in alternate fuels in India.

In 2021, the Government of Maharashtra launched a new Electric Vehicle (EV) Policy and has also committed to promote other segments of clean mobility

The Pune Alternate Fuel Conclave (AFC), an initiative of the Government of Maharashtra, is being organised by Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) and Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB), in association with Mahratta Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Agriculture (MCCIA) from **2nd to 5th April 2022**, in Pune.

PUNE
AFC
ALTERNATE FUEL
CONCLAVE

WHAT DOES THE AFC AIM TO ACHIEVE?

To attract investment in alternate fuels & clean mobility in Maharashtra by positioning the state as a domain leader

To provide a platform for dialogue between key stakeholders on clean mobility technologies

To create an awareness among the masses about clean mobility initiatives across the globe

To help design and conceptualise a pathway for promoting clean mobility solutions

An exhibition of EVs and the alternate fuels ecosystem

02-05 April 2022
Sinchan Nagar Ground
Pune

Pune AFC 2022 will host India's largest vehicle exhibition exclusively focused on alternate fuel technologies, conducted across the four days of the Conclave. Two-wheelers, three-wheelers, cars, goods vehicles, and buses from leading manufacturers like Tata Motors, Piaggio, Skoda, Volkswagen, KPIT, etc. powered by electricity, hydrogen fuel, and biofuels will be on display. Companies are also expected to launch new products on the auspicious occasion of Gudi Padwa. The exhibition will have a free entry for all. Pune's Regional Transport Office (RTO) Desk will also be present at the exhibition to facilitate purchase and easy registration of new vehicles by the citizens. Pune EV Cell will also be present at the Exhibition to act as a knowledge hub for the citizens and to spread awareness about electric vehicles and various government policies. Bank booths will facilitate financing options to support the vehicle consumers at the venue. There are no charges for visiting the exhibition.

India's biggest EV rally

03 April 2022
Sinchan Nagar Ground
Pune

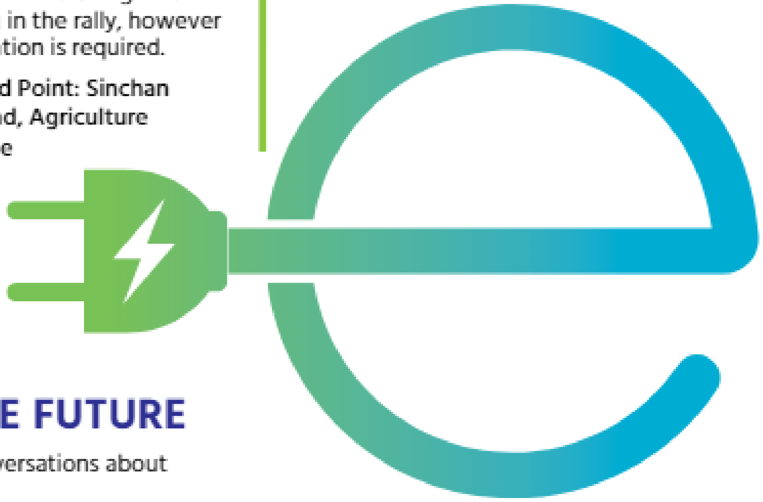
The conclave will also see India's largest EV rally, covering several iconic locations in Pune. Commencing at 8 AM on 3rd April 2022, the vehicles in the rally will cover a distance of 30 kms and feature EV enthusiasts and owners showcasing their vehicles. The EV charging infrastructure players will be setting up charging stations at several locations on the track to provide a demo for the vehicle charging during the rally. There shall be a provision for citizens to be able to follow the rally using a map published in advance of the event. There are no charges for participating in the rally, however prior registration is required.

Start and End Point: Sinchan Nagar Ground, Agriculture College, Pune

A conference of thought leaders of EV & alternate fuels

04 & 05 April 2022
JW Marriott
Pune

The Alternate Fuel Conference will be organised on 4th and 5th April under the thought leadership segment of the AFC. In addition to an introductory and valedictory session, the conference will feature panel discussions and fireside chats on key new-mobility topics. Speakers at the event will include Cabinet Ministers, Senior Government Officials, Investors, Bankers, Industry Leaders, Start-ups and Civil Society. Over 15 Municipal Commissioners and Consul Generals from more than 10 countries would also be participating in the conference.



SETTING THE AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

The panel discussions and fire-side chats will initiate conversations about

- The Future of Indian Mobility
- Zero-Emission Commercial Fleets and Public Transport
- Enabling Investment in Future Mobility
- Enhancing EV Production in India
- Financing India's E-mobility Transition
- Building Infrastructure and Fuelling Growth with Clean Energy for EVs

Venue: JW Marriott Hotel, Pune

Government of Maharashtra

MIDC

MAHARASHTRA POLLUTION CONTROL BOARD

MAGNETIC MAHARASHTRA 2.0
#MadeForBusiness

mcci
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The Pursuit of Pleasure

The many rewards of seeking Rameshvara

I HAVE BEEN TALKING about the 12 *jyotirlingams* on the basis of what is said about them in the Shiva Purana. We are nearing the end, and this column is about Rameshvara. Most of us know the basic story of Rameshvara.

Suta said, "After this, I will speak about the *lingam* known as Rameshvara and about how it originated earlier. O Rishis! Listen lovingly. Earlier, Vishnu, loved by the virtuous, assumed an avatar on earth. O Brahmanas! Ravana, extensive in his use of *maya*, abducted Sita. He took Janaka's daughter to his own residence in Lanka. Searching for her, he arrived at the city known as Kishkindha. Becoming Sugriva's friend, he killed Vali. He remained there for some time, searching for her. He held consultations with Sugriva, Lakshmana and others. The son of the king sent the monkeys in the four directions. Hanuman was the foremost amongst the ones who were sent to search her out. The supreme monkey went to Lanka. From his words, Raghava got to know that Sita had been taken to Lanka. He also received Sita's crest-jewel and was delighted. O Brahmanas! Along with the lord among monkeys, Lakshmana, the leader Sugriva and a sacred force of strong *vanaras* who numbered 18 *padmas*, Rama went to the shores of the ocean. [A *padma* is a very large number, specifically, a thousand billion.] The salty ocean can be seen in the southern direction. Rama went there and stationed himself on the shore. Loved by Shiva, he was served by Lakshmana and the *vanaras*. "Alas! Where has Janaki gone? When will I go and meet her? This army of *vanaras* must be made to cross the fathomless ocean. The *rakshasa* who held up the mountain [Ravana held up Kailasha] is extremely strong and valiant. His fortress, known as Lanka, is impossible to penetrate. Indrajit is his son." Remaining on the shore with Lakshmana, these were his thoughts. Angada and the other residents of the forest comforted him."

"Meanwhile, Raghava, supreme among Shiva's devotees, wanted some water and lovingly spoke to his brother, known as Lakshmana. Rama said, "O Brother! O Lakshmana! O Lord of Heroes! I am thirsty and wish for some water. Please ask a *vanara* to quickly fetch me some." Hearing this, the *vanaras* dashed off in the 10 directions. They brought water. Prostrating themselves, they stood in front of him and spoke. The *vanaras* said, "O Lord! Please accept the water. Obeying your command, we have brought it. It is tasty and is the best. It is cool and revives life." He was extremely pleased and cast a glance of compassion towards them. Hearing this, Ramachandra accepted the water. He was about to drink the water that had been brought. But because of Shiva's wish, he remembered something. "I have not seen Shambhu yet. How can I drink water? He is Paresha, my lord who bestows every kind of bliss." Saying this, the supreme descendant of the Raghu lineage drank the water. After this, the descendant of the Raghu lineage worshipped a *parthiva lingam*. He performed *avahana* and other rituals and devised 16 kinds of *upachara*. Following the norms, he lovingly worshipped the divinity, Shankara. He prostrated himself and made efforts to satisfy him with divine hymns. Full of joy and devotion, Rama prayed to Shankara. Rama said, "O Lord! O Shambhu! O Mahadeva! You are always affectionate towards your devotees. Please save me. I am your devotee and have sought refuge with you. My mind is distressed. O one who enables a person to cross over the ocean of *samsara*! This water is fathomless. The *rakshasa* known as Ravana is immensely strong. He is extremely valiant. In fighting a battle, this army of *vanaras* is fickle. How will my task be accomplished? How will I get my beloved back? O one excellent in vows! Therefore, your task is to help me. O Lord! Without your help, my task is impossible to accomplish. Ravana is one of your own. Therefore, in every possible way, he is impossible to defeat. He is insolent because of the boons received from you. He is immensely brave and has conquered the three worlds. I am also your servant and am subservient to you in every possible way. O Sadashiva! Thinking about this, you should be partial towards me." In this way, he prayed and repeatedly prostrated himself. He said, "Victory to Shankara, the one who punishes the wicked. Victory." Thus, using mantras and *dhyana*, he praised Shiva. He again worshipped him and bent down before him. His heart was flooded with love and the voice choked in his throat."

"The divinity Shankara was greatly pleased. Maheshvara appeared on the shores of the ocean, along with his companions. He was a mass of energy. He manifested himself in this sparkling and wonderful form. Maheshvara was satisfied at the devotion in Rama's heart. Shiva told Rama, "All will be well. Ask for a boon." Seeing that form, all of them were purified. Devoted to Shiva's dharma, Raghava worshipped him. Rejoicing, he praised him in many kinds of ways and prostrated himself. He prayed for his victory against Ravana. Maheshvara's mind was pleased at Rama's devotion. He spoke again, affectionately. "O great king! May you be victorious." He obtained the permission for victory, bestowed by Shiva. With his head lowered and his hands joined in salutation, he prayed again. "O Lord! For purifying the worlds, please remain established here. O Shankara! If you are satisfied, please do this to help others." Thus addressed, Shiva assumed the form of a *lingam* there. On earth, he became famous under the name of Rameshvara. As a result of his powers, Rama crossed the ocean easily. He swiftly killed Ravana and the other *rakshasas* and got his beloved back. Rameshvara's greatness is wonderful and unmatched on earth. It bestows objects of pleasure and emancipation and always grants devotees what they wish for. If a person devoutly bathes Shiva in Rameshvara with divine water from the Ganga, he becomes a *jivanmukta*. He enjoys all the objects of pleasure in this world, difficult for even the devas to obtain. At the end, he certainly obtains supreme *jnana* and *kaivalya*. I have thus spoken to you about Shiva's divine *jyotirlingam*, known as Rameshvara. When one hears about it, sins are destroyed."

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

RAMESHVARA'S GREATNESS IS WONDERFUL AND UNMATCHED ON EARTH. IT BESTOWS OBJECTS OF PLEASURE AND EMANCIPATION AND ALWAYS GRANTS DEVOTEES WHAT THEY WISH FOR. IF A PERSON DEVOUTLY BATHES SHIVA IN RAMESHVARA WITH DIVINE WATER FROM THE GANGA, HE BECOMES A *JIVANMUKTA*

There is a famous *stotram* known as the '*Dvadasha jyotirlingam stotram*'. I have referred to it in the past, but have not actually quoted it. You will find plenty of versions floating around on the internet. This puts me off a bit, because in the process of indiscriminate quoting, people make errors, including grammatical ones. It is probably better not to quote at all. If one is desperate to quote, one should check out the authenticity of the source from a credible version. *Sanskritdcouments.org* is one such. सौराष्ट्रे सोमनाथं च श्रीशैले मल्लिकार्जुनम्। उज्जयिन्यां महाकालमोङ्कारममलेश्वरम् ।। परल्यां वैद्यनाथं च डाकिन्यां भीमशङ्करम्। सेतुबन्धे तु रामेशं नागेशं दारुकावने ॥ वाराणस्यां तु विश्वेशं त्र्यम्बकं गौतमीतटे। हिमालये तु केदारं घुश्मेशं च शिवालये।।एतानि ज्योतिर्लिङ्गानि सायं प्रातः पठेन्नरः। सप्तजन्मकृतं पापं स्मरणेन विनश्यति।। एतेशां दर्शनादेव पातकं नैव तिष्ठति। कर्मक्षयो भवेत्तस्य यस्य तुष्टो महेश्वराः।। This is the version one will get in the Puranas, with minor variations from one Purana to another. For instance, this version differs marginally from that in the Shiva Purana.

What does this say? "Somanatha in Sourashtra, Mallikarjuna in Shrishaila; Mahakala in Ujjayini, Amaleshvara in Omkara. Vaidyanatha in Parali, Bhimashankara in Dakini; Ramesha in Setubandha, Nagesha in Darukavana. Vishvesha in Varanasi, Tryambaka on the banks of Goutami; Kedara in Himalaya, Ghushmesha in Shivalaya." This ends the listing of the 12. After this, "If a man reads about these *jyotrilingams* morning and evening, as soon as he remembers them, the sins accumulated across seven births are destroyed. If he sees them, it is impossible for sins to remain. If these Maheshvaras are pleased, all his karma is destroyed." Note that this is the '*Dvadasha jyotirlingam stotram*', as stated in the Puranas. There is a more elaborate version, with descriptions of the 12 *jyotirlingams* too. That is not from the Puranas. It was composed by Adi Shankaracharya. To illustrate what I mean, this is what Adi Shankarachayra had to say about Rameshvara: "सुताम्रपर्णीजलराशियोगे निबध्य सेतुं विशिखैरसंख्यैः। श्रीरामचन्द्रेण समर्पितं तं रामेश्वराख्यं नियतं नमामि ।।/I control myself and prostrate myself before the one named Rameshvara. Shri Ramachandra worshipped this. He used innumerable arrows and constructed a bridge at the confluence of the mass of waters of the excellent Tamraparni." There can be no doubt about where Rameshvara is. There are geographical doubts about Vaidyanath, Bhimashankara, Nagesha and Ghushmesha. ■

PLAYTIME WITH BORIA MAJUMDAR

Redemption Song

Jhulan Goswami can still rescue India's World Cup campaign

AS I SIT DOWN to write, India's World Cup campaign is on a knife-edge. They need to win their last two games and also focus on the net run rate to be able to make the semi-finals. Inconsistency and the inability to defend good totals have impacted the team hard and the pressure, needless to say, is mounting.

It has always come down to that one crucial game for India in 50-over World Cups. In 2017, it was against New Zealand that India played a virtual quarter-final. And the Indian girls stepped up when it mattered. A Mithali Raj 100 and a Veda Krishnamurthy classic ensured India were in the semi-finals after some hiccups on the way. The script seems to be unfolding in a very similar manner in 2022. India will now have to win against South Africa to stay in the reckoning.

It isn't impossible. Rather, I would back the Indian team to win against South Africa and stage a comeback. While they have been inconsistent so far, we have seen in patches what they are capable of. Against the West Indies, it was a complete team effort while against Australia it was a very good batting performance in the end. And that's what brings me to Jhulan Goswami. India will need its greatest bowler ever to stand up and be counted in the last game. In 2017, Goswami wasn't bowling well at the start of the tournament. So much so, she urged the coach to bench her if he so wished. On the way to Derby, she sat on the front seat of the bus discussing her future with the coach and went on to suggest that she be dropped in the interests of the team. That's the real Goswami for you. A perfect teammate and a true legend.

"Yes, I was not bowling well and more importantly not picking up wickets for the team. As a senior player it is my job to give the team crucial breakthroughs and that's what I was not able to do. Deep down my frustration was building. It wasn't about any lack of effort. Rather, it was just one of those phases. However much I tried, things weren't working. That's when I went up to the coach and asked him to drop me if he so wanted. The team always comes first and it was my responsibility to tell the coach that there was no compulsion to play me," remembered Goswami when we spoke on the matter.

Then coach Tushar Arothe convinced Goswami to keep trying and assured her that she had the fullest backing of the team. That's all that was needed. Goswami produced a classic against Meg Lanning in the semi-final and bowled a historic spell in the final.

"Yes, Tushar was very supportive. He asked me to get rid of all the negative thoughts and focus on the job at hand, which was to pick up wickets. I felt good after that conversation and thereafter started planning what I needed to do to make a difference to my team. Ahead of the Australia match, for example, I had specially planned for Meg Lanning. She is an excellent batter and the key to their batting line-up. We needed her early to push Australia back. I am glad it worked," said Goswami.

INDIA WILL NEED ITS GREATEST BOWLER EVER TO STAND UP AND BE COUNTED IN THE LAST GAME. YES, JHULAN GOSWAMI IS FIVE YEARS OLDER AND HER BODY HAS TAKEN MUCH POUNDING. SHE MAY ALSO HAVE LOST A COUPLE OF YARDS IN PACE. BUT SHE STILL HAS THE SKILLS AND WE HAVE SEEN IT IN PATCHES IN NEW ZEALAND

Against South Africa, we need her to step up one final time. Yes, she is five years older and her body has taken much pounding in the interim. She may also have lost a couple of yards in pace. But she still has the skills and we have seen it in patches in New Zealand. All said and done, Jhulan Goswami ball in hand in a high pressure game is still the best option India has. If India has to beat South Africa, the team in form at the moment, it has to be Goswami leading the attack with wickets up front. Having known Jhulan for decades, I wouldn't put it past her. I can con-

GETTY IMAGES

SPORT FORCES A PERFORMER TO FAIL IN FULL PUBLIC VIEW. THAT JHULAN GOSWAMI HAS NOT DONE WELL IS A FACT. BUT AGAIN, THAT'S WHERE SPORT REDEEMS ITSELF. IT IS THE ONLY PLATFORM WHICH ALSO ALLOWS A PERFORMER TO COME BACK AND WIN IN PUBLIC. THAT'S WHAT I AM EXPECTING JHULAN TO DO AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA

jecture she would be pacing up and down in her room thinking about what she needs to do. I know in her mind she will soon come to terms with the task at hand. She is Jhulan Goswami after all. Two hundred matches and 250 wickets don't come easy. We need her to stand up for the last game. Twenty years of achievement and one final game to take her team to the semi-final. That's what India needs from her and, as I said, don't put it past her to deliver when it matters the most. She is already a fairytale. Maybe the last chapter is waiting to be written the coming week.

Is this pure emotion for someone I have known for years or is it based on rational, objective analysis? It is a fact that Jhulan has had a poor World Cup. She has looked jaded and tired and has also conceded a lot of runs on occasions. And yet I feel optimistic. It is because she has the experience to bounce back when the chips are down. She has been in tough situations before and has the ability to produce a rabbit out of the hat. And isn't sport more about failure than success? Isn't that what makes sport what it is? It is real, not reel, and there are no retakes.

Sport is that unique platform which forces a performer to fail in full public view. In every other sphere, failure is an acutely personal experience. Sport, however, is different. That Jhulan has not done well is in the public domain and is a recorded fact. But again, that's where sport redeems itself. It is the only platform which also allows a performer to come back and win in public. With the help of your team and support unit, you can recuperate and come back and prove to the world who you are and what you are made off. In sum, redeem yourself in full public gaze and make a difference.

That's what I am expecting Jhulan to do against South Africa. For, in the end, sport is also about hope and fulfilment. It is about stories of courage and success and triumph against adversity. When the Indian women's team made the finals of the 2005 World Cup, few celebrated the achievement. Jhulan and Mithali had to still travel in unreserved compartments sitting next to toilets on occasions. Those days are long gone and come the South Africa game, millions will be queuing up in front of their television sets to cheer for Jhulan Goswami. The stage is set. It is time we heard the redemption song. And if that happened, the campaign would still be alive and India in the semi-finals. Thereafter, it is anyone's tournament with two knockout matches deciding the outcome. While it is not fair to look too far ahead, it can certainly be said that for Jhulan and Mithali, nothing is over yet. And in sport nothing is really over till it's actually over. ■

GLOBALSUTRA | **Pallavi Aiyar**

Party and the Family

What Sonia Gandhi can learn from Megawati Sukarnoputri

WITH ITS LATEST, but undoubtedly not last, abysmal performance at the polls, the choice for India's Congress has never been starker: reinvention or death. Reinvention at this point is a euphemism for de-Gandhification. And yet, with every defeat that the party chalks up, its irrational solution has been to thrust still more Gandhi on the voters. Caught between family loyalty and political suicide, Congress appears willing to shuffle off its mortal coil rather than find a non-Gandhi leader among India's 1.3 billion-strong population.

But it is hardly the first, or only, political party to find itself strung upon this particular pair of dilemma-festooned horns. India's maritime neighbour and nomenclatural cousin, Indonesia, is also home to a grand old, independence-era party, with an ongoing tension between dynasty and durability.

I am referring to PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan), the modern-day avatar of PNI, the party that dominated Indonesia's political landscape in the first few decades of its independence. PDI-P's chairwoman, Megawati Sukarnoputri is, as her name indicates, the daughter of Sukarno, the archipelago's first post-independence president.

Sukarno and Jawaharlal Nehru were friends and brothers in non-aligned arms. And the imperious Megawati has certainly borrowed from the best Nehru-Gandhi tradition in surrounding herself with yes-men. A culture of sycophancy is as endemic to PDI-P as it is to Congress. Loyalty to the Sukarno family is the usual path to political success for party hopefuls.

And yet, despite all her power-clinging tendencies, Megawati had the sense to see that which the Gandhis appear unable to, despite the very large writing on the wall. The Sukarno scion realised that the only way for PDI-P to have continued political relevance was by elevating a family-outsider to the ranks of presidential contender.

And so, this is exactly what Megawati did, albeit grumpily, in the last two general elections. In 2014, at the very last minute, she recused herself as presidential candidate in favour of Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, a non-party loyalist. She did this for the excellent reason that he was popular and electable, while she was neither.

Back in 2014 (incidentally, the same year that Narendra Modi came to power in India), PDI-P had just spent two terms in the wilderness of the opposition. Megawati had never won an election. She had served as president from 2001 to 2004, but had been nominated, rather than elected, to that role. PDI-P had gone on to lose both the 2004 and 2009 general elections to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his Democratic Party.

Opinion polls at the time showed Megawati as having about as much chance at winning the presidency as they predicted Rahul Gandhi of leading Congress to an outright victory in national elections in India that same year.

Unlike the Gandhis, however, Megawati had enough of a sense of political self-preservation to back a Sukarno-outsider in the 2014 race. Jokowi was a relative newbie in politics, loved precisely because he was not part of elite Jakarta circles and the families that dominated these.

As in India, the Indonesian electorate was clearly ready for a change. In both countries, the old guard of dynastic politicians was seen as irredeemably compromised and corrupt. Jokowi was a breath of honest-to-goodness fresh air that helped clear the staleness of the Sukarno family grip on PDI-P. A former furniture businessman, he had only entered politics in 2005 when he was elected mayor of Solo, a mid-level city.

Jokowi went on to win both the 2014 and 2019 elections, enabling PDI-P to lead coalition governments, more-or-less conterminously with the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rule at the Centre in India. It was not all smooth sailing.

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

DESPITE ALL HER POWER-CLINGING TENDENCIES, MEGAWATI HAD THE SENSE TO SEE THAT WHICH THE GANDHIS APPEAR UNABLE TO. THE SUKARNO SCION REALISED THAT THE ONLY WAY FOR PDI-P TO HAVE CONTINUED POLITICAL RELEVANCE WAS BY ELEVATING A FAMILY-OUTSIDER TO THE RANKS OF PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDER

Megawati remained loath to cede too much control to the president and attempted to exert power behind the throne throughout Jokowi's time in office.

In this, she partially succeeded. In several instances, she forced Jokowi's hands, particularly in making key government appointments. For example, in his early months in office, Jokowi was cornered into naming Budi Gunawan, a close confidant of Megawati, as the chief of the National Intelligence Agency, despite his tainted and corrupt reputation. More recently in 2021, Jokowi merged several state-owned research institutions into one National Research and Innovation Agency to which he then appointed Megawati as chairperson.

But Jokowi has also proved to be an astute political operator. Soon after taking office in 2014, the president brought in PDI-P rival Golkar into the ruling coalition. This strengthened his position to manoeuvre independently of Megawati's wishes. In 2019, he repeated this stratagem to a similar end.

Sukarno's daughter has learned to share power to remain in power, although it remains an incomplete education. Megawati is grooming her daughter, Puan Maharani, to take over as head of PDI-P in the near future. If Puan proves unelectable—which is quite likely given her unpopularity—a second heir, Muhammad Prananda Prabowo, who is Megawati's son from a different marriage, is also being considered by her as a potential successor.

Megawati clearly does not want the party chairmanship to pass to someone outside the Sukarno clan. And so, despite Jokowi's electoral success, it remains highly unlikely she will pass the party baton on to him. Yet, she has shown that when push comes to shove, she realises that winning a political mandate is more important than keeping PDI-P under family control.

This is more than can be said for the Gandhis and Congress. The inability/unwillingness of Congress to outgrow the Gandhi family has repercussions that are larger than just the inexorable waning of what was once India's primary unifying political force. It deprives the country of a viable opposition at a time when the ruling party has shown the kind of authoritarian tendencies that need tempering.

Habitual inbreeding is a historical recipe for the downfall of empires. But it is an even more egregious sin in a nation with claims to being a republic. That Congress finds it impossible to expand its gene pool in a country as diverse and demographically capacious as India, is shameful.

If the party is ever to be able to stem its bleed, the Gandhis could do worse than learn from PDI-P's evolution in Indonesia. Megawati Sukarnoputri remains an entitled dynast at heart. She is a petulant power-sharer at best. Yet, she has chosen to ensure the relevance of her political party at the cost of the potential irrelevance of her family. Gandhi Inc would do well to 'Look East' in this instance. ■

Wooing THE ALLY

When Akhilesh Yadav, chief of the Samajwadi Party (SP), made an alliance with Jayant Chaudhary of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) for the Uttar Pradesh (UP) election, the expectation was that the latter would bring in the votes of farmers, especially in the western parts of the state, and thus bring SP-RLD to power. But the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) managed to win, leaving Yadav with the question of what to do with the alliance. He might give a Rajya Sabha seat to Chaudhary. For the 2024 General Election, SP still needs Chaudhary's support for a good showing. Also, the tie-up with RLD takes its base beyond the Muslim-Yadav combine.

POINT OF STRESS

One silver lining for SP from the UP election was that Akhilesh Yadav mended fences with his uncle Shivpal. But the latter wants to promote his son Aditya in politics, and the two might again have differences there. Akhilesh is said to have told his uncle that instead of giving him any seat at present, he has plans to make Aditya contest for an important constituency in the 2024 General Election. Will that be enough to mollify Shivpal?

A FUTURE TWIST

Shiv Sena head and Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray came to power breaking away from BJP but he still remains close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The relationship is leading to speculation that at some point the two parties could again come together. And events might be leading in that direction. His main ally, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Sharad Pawar, is said to be not ready to anoint Thackeray's son Aaditya as the successor chief minister. Pawar has his own daughter and nephew whom he might want to see at the top post. There is gossip now that BJP could start a dialogue with Thackeray before the 2024 polls.

TACTICAL ERROR

Mukesh Sahani, a minister in the BJP-Janata Dal (United) government in Bihar, may have overplayed his hand by going against BJP in the UP election. He is an important player in Bihar politics whose outfit, the Vikassheel Insaan Party, has four MLAs in the state. Given the slim majority the alliance has there, he becomes very powerful politically. For the UP election, he tried to bargain for seats with BJP and on being rebuffed, fielded over 50 candidates against it. Now that BJP has won handsomely, it is possible that it will not want him in Bihar. He is said to be wooing Amit Shah again but BJP may not be in a magnanimous mood.

Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

Name Fame

Trinamool Congress' Rajya Sabha MP Sushmita Deb became party to a light moment when the vice chairman of the Upper House, who was presiding, addressed her as Sushmita Sen, the name of the Bollywood star. And he called her Sen two or three times until Deb stood up and said that she appreciated it, but was happier with her own name.

The Strongest One

After its victories in the recent Assembly polls, BJP retained all the earlier chief ministers in the states it won. Even Uttarakhand, where the chief minister lost his seat, wasn't an exception. But it also signals the importance of Yogi Adityanath that he was the only one whose chief ministership of UP had been announced before the election. Among party chief ministers, Adityanath is first among equals. But will that mean Delhi will have less control over him in future? Time will tell.

Cinematic Poll

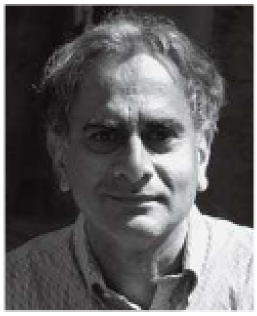
In the West Bengal bypoll for Asansol, the Trinamool Congress candidate is film star and ex-BJP leader Shatrughan Sinha. Besides several Bengali movie celebrities, his daughter Sonakshi, who is also a star, is expected to campaign for him. Meanwhile, BJP is also said to be considering getting Bollywood figures like Akshay Kumar, Mithun Chakraborty and Hema Malini to campaign for the party candidate there.

A THOUGHTFUL GIFT

Recently, Rajya Sabha Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu gave a farewell dinner at his home to members who were retiring. It was topped by a gift of an artwork to each of them, prints of the famous Bharat Mata painting, the work of Abanindranath Tagore. One parliamentarian remarked that Naidu does a lot of homework before deciding on what gifts to give.

OPEN QUESTION

The fate of Keshav Prasad Maurya, the former deputy chief minister of UP under Yogi Adityanath in the latter's first term as chief minister, hangs in balance after he lost the Assembly election. There were rumours that on counting day, as Maurya began to trail, a section of the party wanted to apply police pressure to challenge the process which could have led to violence. The chief minister said there would be no intervention and defused the situation. Maurya might still be useful to the party because of his base among the Kurmis, the caste he hails from. It might help in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. But what post they would give him, whether in party or government, is not known yet.



By GAUTAM BHATIA

IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT CITY

The universal ideal of Auroville

IN 1963, A FRAIL French woman Mirra Alfassa who goes by the title 'Mother' decides to build an ideal city just north of Pondicherry. A follower of Sri Aurobindo, the intent behind her monumental and ambitious venture is to create a geographical centre, part urban part rural, where people from all over the world will live together to express ideas of humanism, self-reliance and integration, the likes of which were never practised before. Inaugurated in 1968 with participants from 120 countries, the new township's progressive approach applies to every possible global challenge known: politics, ecology, agriculture, afforestation, education, health, conservation, public law, social behaviour—all setting a path to innovation and self-discovery.

Fifty-five years later, in December 2021, a set of bulldozers ram an authoritarian ambush into the peaceful community at 1AM. A midnight knock. They clear a path through dense plantation, uproot trees and demolish a section of the Auroville Youth Centre. Backed by the local development council, the destruction of the centre and the hacking of a thousand full-grown trees are meant to send a political message, that a new India is on the march and multiculturalism of the liberal kind would not be tolerated. In a community made up of multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-culturally diverse citizenry, the fear of the state's single-minded commercial and political agenda seems justified. Peaceful protests are first ignored; later dozens of outsiders are bussed to intimidate the residents. So as not to leak legitimate news of the demolitions, a local media service is forcibly shut down. Only when the National Green Tribunal steps in, does the threat stop.

How does a minor defenceless community of seriously ambitious ideals protect itself from a bulldozing behemoth? Sadly, in India, the experimental quest for a utopic existence remains an unquenched thirst. Doubtless, there are all over India people and places on the brink of extraordinary discovery, research and invention. In Tamil Nadu, the concerted testing of agricultural strains may provide future bountiful harvests; northern research institutes test cloned and grafted vegetable and fruit varieties which will provide better yields with little water; a belt of solar panels in Gujarat is the largest renewable energy power unit in the world; a medical experiment in the mountains seeks to deliver aid and precious equipment to sites and villages inaccessible by road. An NGO in Odisha connects illiterate tribals to their government entitlements—access to banking, employment, free rations. It is hard to deny that at the oddest, often most unlikely of places, multiple acts of generosity and optimism are taking place.

But there exists the other less emancipated India, where churches and cathedrals are regularly robbed and idols smashed, and large parts of the local minority populations continue to live fearfully in ghettos. Children in village schools still trudge long distances to empty teacherless classrooms. In summer, malaria and waterborne diseases kill regularly. In the slums of Mumbai and Delhi, increasing unemployment is driving many to more audacious forms of crime. In the food warehouses of Maharashtra, while farmers face certain famine, rats and field mice are fed well and regularly. In some cities, 30 people with empty pots line up at a hand pump, adjacent to a house boundary wall concealing a swimming pool where water is on a constant filter for its two residents. How can the two diverging realities be placed in a common mixing bowl? Is it even possible to create a liveable reality out of such a contentious mess?

For that, the controlled experiment of a city becomes the only possibility. In its six decades, Auroville has gratefully thrown everything into the blender: ways of growing 100-year-old forests as well as quick-yield vegetable farms, a mix of people from 60 nations,

Collective meditation at dawn at the Matrimandir Amphitheatre in Auroville on its foundation day, February 28, 2017

ALAMY

> In its six decades, Auroville has gratefully thrown everything into the blender: ways of growing 100-year-old forests as well as quick-yield vegetable farms, a mix of people from 60 nations; a religious pluralism as accepting of Hindus, Muslims and Christians as Mormons, Buddhists and Atheists; combination of Tamil rural expertise, and German inventiveness from the Ruhr valley; philosophies of Sri Aurobindo and the occidental logic of Martin Luther; plant knowledge of traditional south India; the irrigation practices of the American Southwest. The whole premise relies not on some continual practice of conventional reform, but a complete and explicit rejection of all existing norms

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and another diverse mix from their host nation; a religious pluralism as accepting of Hindus, Muslims and Christians as Mormons, Buddhists and Atheists; a clutch of people from the French White Town and more from the local Black Town; combination of Tamil rural expertise, and German inventiveness from the Ruhr valley; philosophies of Sri Aurobindo and the occidental logic of Martin Luther; plant knowledge of traditional south India; the irrigation practices of the American Southwest; construction techniques that utilise steel as easily as mud; ways of cooling houses through inexpensive and passive local methods adapted to the efficiencies of Western mechanical systems; visual and practical ways of primary schooling, and barter community service as a form of local currency. The whole premise relies not on some continual practice of conventional reform, but a complete and explicit rejection of all existing norms.

At Auroville, the difficult path of achieving such lofty—and always contradictory—goals had to tread a careful structured plan, a stipulated four-step approach.

PLACE: First and foremost was the establishment of a visible entity, a physical place for the active application of ideals. It started on 22 square kilometres along the northern edge of Pondicherry. A barren site for constructing a settlement close to the city and to the coastline that took its inspiration from Sri Aurobindo's hope that humanity is a form of transience moving and aspiring to a better world. As a universal township, Auroville would be a physical manifestation of that goal. The presence of citizens from 120 nations on Inauguration Day attested to the strength of the idea that the city belonged to humanity as a whole.

COMMUNITY: Next came the structure of common living, the setting up of a home base where people reside, engage and work together. The city as a perennial resource to a natural life surrounded by an extensive greenbelt, farms, botanical gardens, seed banks and newly planted forests. Within the perimeter come new ways of harnessing energy, creating water catchment areas and natural dams. Cooperative farming and shared skills of home construction take the experiment into a new lived reality.

SOCIETY: Third is the move towards further cohesion as a society, the creation of a public life in the city. The ambitious agenda can be daunting at an urban scale but the wider civic plan envisions a series of radials that divides the land into pie-shaped sections for education, recreation, industry, culture, etc. Within the clustered groupings of buildings are activities for baking and pottery, schools and health services, community centres, parks, recreation and society offices. Slow to develop over 20 years, the area acquires essential services where residents meet regularly, contribute labour or goods to the community and in turn collect basic needs for daily life.

CULTURE: Finally, the philosophical centre of the township is a monumental magnificence, the Matrimandir, a golden metallic structure, its spherical shape designed in earthly measures to be entirely directionless, without any cardinal orientation and rising heavenwards to celestial connection. As the Mother explained: "[A] symbol and space that aspires to man's aspiration for absolute perfection".

SO OPEN AND idealistic in its conception, it was hard to contest the view in any rational terms. Human drives in vastly different forms and historical eras have pursued life's possibilities beyond the scope of realisable limits. Following from Thomas More's *Utopia*—an exploration of 16th century English society where people learn to live a common life, without private property, abolish caste and class, avoid war, disparage all show and finery, and tolerate all religions. *Utopia*'s very basis was economic and political.

More recent returns to the ideal society came shrouded in varying forms of architectural megalomania. Italian American architect Paolo Soleri's dream began at Arcosanti in Arizona, a massive concrete megalith that grew in an uncontrolled additive process based on Soleri's ideas of urban planning, with the eventual aim of creating a city for 5,000 residents. Within the magnified raw concrete structure, Arcosanti was envisioned as a hyper-dense neighbourhood, self-sustaining, designed to maximise human interaction while conserving ground space. "A city in the image of Man", never finished, always ongoing.

Then came other more enduring failures. Barely a short ride north into the American state of Nevada, Michael Heizer began building the world's largest earthwork called 'City' in the late 1960s. For 50 years, he has treated 'City' as a personal quest, using earthmovers to shift dirt and cement across miles of bleached emptiness in the Nevada desert. Vast concrete ramps, earth pits and mounds appear in the landscape creating geometry so monumental, lunar and alluring it is visible only from the air. At 77, the mad artist and architect has driven himself to the brink of death building it. But, like Arcosanti, his structure remains incomplete.

So too are many ideas of the world's most ambitious 20th century engineer—the inventor of the geodesic dome, Buckminster Fuller, who created the hexagonal Dymaxion House. Contained within 100 square metres, pre-packaged in aluminium, shipped and to be assembled by the buyer, it grouped utilities around a central core, leaving the rooms in a radial formation. The bathroom shower functioned on one cup of water in a condensed stream, located as it were, above a toilet that consumed no water at all. Fuller abandoned the project in 1944 when the US government's post-war housing priorities forced quick production of housing units. Instead, he directed his energies into combating the overheating of cities in the summer. Long before dire implications of climate change even appeared on the horizon, Fuller had begun researching ways to shield the Earth's surface from excessive sun through a system of orbiting shades. In a controlled orbit around the Earth, the vast moving plates would not only provide a moving shadow but also seed the clouds into producing more rain for the parched areas below.

Bucky, as he came to be known by friends, appeared for a guest lecture at my university in Philadelphia, where I was studying architecture. Almost 90 years old then, he walked about on stage staring myopically at slides of his own inventions, and trying to explain as coherently as possible his outrageous ideas to an entirely unbelieving sceptical crowd of students. It was impossible to connect to his baffling designs, so monumentally off the earth and quite

Mirra Alfassa, the Mother (1878-1973)

ALAMY

> Its 50 years of active struggle to perfecting the Mother's belief in the creation of a universal town of men and women from all countries that will rise above political, racial and ethnic differences, and create a place for humanity, perhaps will never be realised. But in the long stage of its practical experience as a township of perpetual learning and striving, it has gained enormous footholds in urban ideals

Children uphold placards showing their country of origin at Auroville's inauguration on February 28, 1968 (top); the aftermath of bulldozers uprooting trees and razing a building in Auroville on December 10, 2021

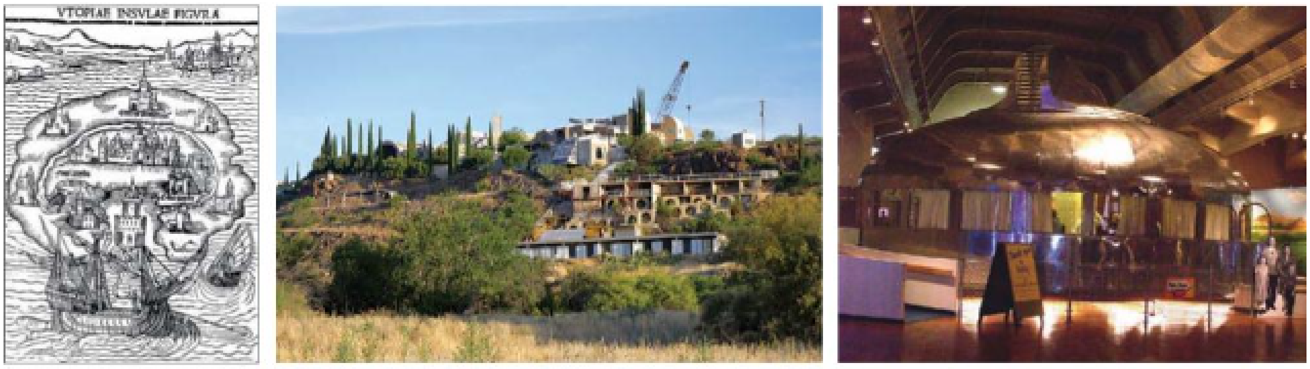
literally in the clouds. His rambling tone and shambling gait across the far end of the vast auditorium seemed so brief, frail and insignificant against the backdrop of his enormous intellectual and innovative life, it was hard to connect this tiny speck of white hair with the audacity of his thinking. He ended the lecture with a picture of a transparent dome over New York City, a clear glass structure that stretched from river to river and covered the extended island of Manhattan's skyscrapers, Central Park, and the rest in a controlled hermetically sealed environment. The talk ended, and everyone filed out of the auditorium in absolute silence, shuffling back to the studios to design small suburban houses.

In our own time, few if anyone in India think in terms so broad and far-reaching as Fuller. The dome over Manhattan never even came close to being realised, even though, it had been carefully lab-assessed, studied, and had sound reasoning for its engineering and potential fabrication. Called at the time as "the world's most successful failure", its provocative concepts have gone on to influence a host of inventors. The biggest take from the 'What If' phenomenon is undoubtedly Elon Musk, whose gravity-defying work may not have yet contributed to a new civic vision on Earth, but like Bucky, sets brash standards for electric transport, renewable energy, and hyper-travel between cities. Even if, one day some of these cities may be on Mars.

IN THE PAST century, the American search for a utopic life has differed vastly from the ambitions of more earthbound societies like India. How can the euphoric visions of singular individuals—architects, engineers and inventors—ever compare with the wholescale battle of ideas deliberately condensed by thousands of contributing citizens into the finite acreage of a new city? Auroville grew from thousands of seeds planted on infertile ground, ravaged by dissonance, filled with hope, destroyed by arson and hurricanes, embroiled in local race battles, struggling to test new economics and barter systems, but in the end rescued by the promise of a new life. An urban experiment always on slow boil. Its nearest Western counterpart was an ambitious urban plan initiated in the US, parallel to the Auroville timeframe, called The Great Society. Then US President Lyndon B Johnson's initiative was similarly linked to creating equity in American cities: reviving inner city education, eliminating drugs and poverty, enacting legislation on local services, setting standards for housing, clean air, establishing cultural centres and new acts for wild life and environmental protection. So wide was the scope, so solid the strength of its political reach, it even raised ideas on the role of beauty in urban life, the necessity of public art, and the quality of citizenship.

While The Great Society struggled within the marginalised framework of America's inner cities, Auroville began as a whole new venture. Its imperfections grew from within, to make apparent to its legislative council that all was not well with the original idea. Originally, all physical assets of the city belonged to the Sri Aurobindo Society, but in 1980, under the new Emergency Provisions Act, the Indian government took over the city management. As of now, the city has only 3,000 residents, despite the original intention of making it grow to a sizeable 50,000. Living relatively peacefully the population from 59 countries is housed in neighbourhoods with names in Sanskrit, French, Tamil and English: Aspiration, Auromodel, Aarati to name a few. Its 50 years of active struggle to perfecting the Mother's belief in the creation of a universal town of men and women from all countries that will rise above political, racial and ethnic differences, and create a place for humanity, perhaps will never be realised. But in the long stage of its practical experience as a township of perpetual learning and striving, it has gained enormous footholds in urban ideals: 1,300 acres of barren wasteland has acquired over 30 years of sustained cultivation, a lush forest.

(L-R) The illustration for the 1516 edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*; Acrosanti in Arizona; and Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House as installed in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn



Auroville's most critical lesson is the only possible course for any future city in India: what we build now will dictate the difference between surviving alone, or living well together. Any attempt to physically destroy the city now will be an erasure of 50 years of constructed imagination. India's urban future needs multiple such experiments, numerous communities that can rise above the failures of current civic models and propose new ways of living

* * *

The dry fallow ground has been restored into a finetuned balance with denuded sources of water now rejuvenated. Cultural and artistic traditions of craft and pottery have been revived. Several employment schemes for women in surrounding villages have been activated and are successfully run under a variety of activity centres like the Auroville Industrial School, Auroville Health Services and schools for local handicapped children. The search towards a shared economy and communal harmony continues in hope-filled programmes like Reach for the Stars—scholarships for higher education for village children. In retrospect, the larger picture has been formed in perennial optimism: the successful testing of sustainable architecture, creative farming, water purification and conservation, renewable energy application, community education and healthcare, art and craft revival, localised monetary exchange, and the political governance reduced to a simple amplified message: when humanity's aspiration is perfection, the city belongs to no one and to everyone.

That Auroville still continues half-a-century since its inception is the surest sign that humanity desires inevitable and perennial movement towards that singular ideal. Throughout the early phase of locating a site, building, setting standards of community life, congregation commerce, schooling, and public engagement, there was bound to be confrontation. The dissimilarities between the new settlers and the old settled could not be more glaring; that the setting was an impoverished illiterate rural setting in south India, instead of a rich suburban commune in northern California, ensured that there would be racism, cultural unrest, and clash of ideals. Without these, the perfect community would remain either a pipedream or a walled project in isolation. Auroville's most critical lesson is the only possible course for any future city in India: what we build now will dictate the difference between surviving alone, or living well together.

Any attempt to physically destroy the city now will be an erasure of 50 years of constructed imagination. India needs more Aurovilles not fewer… Instead, it gets Chandigarhs and Gandhinagars and smart cities; it gets facile makeovers of secondhand ideas; it gets token signatures of history and melodrama in Amravati and Raipur. The serious steps to questioning urbanism, architecture, soil ecology, greening, afforestation, and conservation have not appeared in 70 years of independent building. There is nothing radical in glass cities that evolve out of computerised efficiencies—but it is wholly so when 18,000 trees nurtured over four decades transform the ecology of an arid place. It hardly matters that utilities are on a power-sharing grid, but it does matter when electricity is made entirely renewable and often not needed at all. Such answers came not from a reform of existing structures, but a rejection of the old and replacement with an altogether new approach. For that reason India's urban future needs multiple such experiments, numerous communities that can rise above the failures of current civic models and propose new ways of living.

Of the more than 60 nationalities represented there among a large population of Indians, the hope of continuity was echoed by 82-year-old German Frederick Buxloh as he stood watching the bulldozers noisily working into the night. Having grown up under Hitler's Nazi regime, and a direct witness to the violence of war and racism, he spoke with sad and quiet eloquence: "After trying to understand what possessed the German race to commit such brutality," he said, "I came to India. No other country had the wisdom and tolerance that I found here." After living in Auroville for 54 years, in Frederick's mind the country's ancient vision is suddenly being questioned and put to test. "What's happening right now is shaking me to the core." ■

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based architect and the author of Delirious City, *a satire on Indian urban life*

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COVER STORY

WHY CON ESSENTIAL FO HOW IT CAN

Congress must rejuvenate itself, bringing in fresh faces and
if the party took steps to promote inner-party democracy and a
party to internal elections for its key positions. Seek the
favoured few. Allow and encourage the emergence of local, state

Sonia and Rahul Gandhi at the Congress Working Committee meeting in New Delhi on March 13, 2022

GRESS IS
R INDIA AND
BE REVIVED

**young blood into its leadership at all levels. It would help
more consultative decision-making style: Open up the
views of a wide cross-section of party stalwarts, not just a
and regional leaders, ratified by periodic votes of party members**

By SHASHI THAROOR

Photo AP

The results of the five state elections have brought the knives out in and around the Congress party—as well as the pens, to write the obituaries of the GOP. The news was certainly the worst it could have been—not just absolute defeat, but no redeeming consolation to offer as even those states where the party was expected to do well tumbled by the wayside. We lost power in Punjab, which we had ruled for five years and where just nine months ago re-election had seemed assured—and we lost it humiliatingly. Two states where the election campaigns had seemed to be going well, Uttarakhand and Goa, handed Congress resounding defeats. Manipur re-elected a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government that had seemed to be in trouble. And in Uttar Pradesh (UP), of course, the state that had once produced five Congress prime ministers rejected the party so utterly that it wasn't even a player this time.

If all this wasn't bad enough, the numbers told a sorrier tale of lack of support for the party across the board. In the 2019 elections, Congress, whose vote share had never dropped below 30 per cent till the 21st century breached that threshold, scored only 19.49 per cent to BJP's 37.36 per cent. The party's shrinking voter base has been revealed nowhere more dramatically than in the nation's capital, where despite 15 years of largely effective rule at the turn of the century, the party dropped from 40.31 per cent in 2008 to 4.36 per cent in 2020. In a number of states—a number that seems to increase with every election—Congress has ceased to be a contender for power at all: Tamil Nadu, UP, West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha being the most prominent examples of states where the party has been out of power so long that it is no longer regarded seriously.

The picture is grim, and the poison-quills are being sharpened daily in the editorial chambers of the nation's media. But even without denying any of this, it is important to underscore one vital truth: India cannot do without Congress. What it stands for, and the space it occupies, are essential for the nation to survive and thrive.

A party is principally defined by its values, principles and convictions, and the policies it devises to execute them. But a party is also an organisational vehicle for those ideas, and this is where Congress has faltered. Some have claimed ideological confusion is to blame for failures that clearly have more to do with organisational deficiencies. As disillusionment mounts across the nation with the party's colossal electoral setbacks, the one strain of argument I find myself exasperated by is that of those pundits who claim Congress doesn't know what it stands for. They are just attacking Narendra Modi and

The author (left) with Rahul Gandhi outside Parliament in August 2012

GETTY IMAGES

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Februa

Dissenting Congress leaders, who as part of a group of 23 had written a letter to Sonia Gandhi in 2020 asking for 'sweeping changes' in the party, at a meeting in Jammu in February 2021

BJP, these savants declare; they have no narrative of their own. What is the Congress ideology? What beliefs and policies are they offering the nation? To me, the answers are crystal clear.

SECULARISM

One key value entwined in Congress' DNA goes back to before the founding of the Republic. Congress strived to prevent Partition before finally surrendering to the inevitable, but when it occurred, the party never accepted the logic that since Pakistan had ostensibly been created for India's Muslims, what remained was a state for Hindus. Its pre-eminent leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, his colleagues and successors lived up to his lifelong conviction that India belonged to all who had contributed to its history and civilisation, and that the majority community had a special obligation to protect the rights, and promote the well-being, of India's minorities. In both governmental policy and personal practice, Congress stood for an idea of India that embraced those of every religion, caste, ethnicity and language.

Nehru saw our country as an "ancient palimpsest" on which successive rulers and subjects had inscribed their visions without erasing what had been asserted previously—we not only coexist, but thrive in our diversity which is our strength. He was followed in Congress by a generation of secular nationalists who echoed this tradition, making "unity in diversity" the most hallowed of independent India's self-defining slogans. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, whom the current government has tried to appropriate, exemplified this by his actions to protect Muslims during the Partition riots in Delhi in 1947. Congress is the political embodiment of India's pluralism and a strong, committed voice for the preservation of secularism as its fundamental reflection. We need to reaffirm our belief in these values and keep reiterating them at every opportunity. BJP's abandonment of Indian pluralism in pursuit of the folly of a Hindu Rashtra has made minorities insecure and foreign friends anxious.

Congress' answer to BJP's brazen majoritarianism is derided by some commentators as "soft Hindutva". As I have explained at length in my book *Why I Am a Hindu* (2018), our Hinduism (for those of us in Congress who are Hindu) is not Hindutva (which is a purely political ideology). When we speak of our Hinduism it is not in pale imitation of their bigotry and chauvinism, which we reject; it is to neutralise their communal appeal by pointing out that we too share Hinduism, albeit an inclusive version of the faith, rather than a bigoted one.

Our differences from BJP are stark. We seek to empower Muslims, not marginalise them in ghettoes. We give election tickets to Muslim candidates; BJP's is the first government in independent India's history to have no elected Muslim MP in Lok Sabha. It failed to remedy this dubious distinction in its second term. BJP's supporters engineer anti-minority violence to promote polarisation; we seek to douse the flames, not justify the rage. We work to improve the economic status of minorities, instead of pretending that's irrelevant.

It is this approach, perhaps debatably labelled as "secularism", that is being questioned today in an effort to redefine nationalism in more sectarian terms. The ruling party's architects are limited by a lack of vision and an absence of great-heartedness that prevents them from seeing the larger

THE PARTY SHOULD NOT MERELY BE SEEN AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR FIGHTING ELECTIONS EVERY FEW YEARS. THERE IS A GREAT DEAL THAT IT CAN AND MUST DO BETWEEN ELECTIONS. WE HAVE TO RETURN TO THE ETHOS OF POLITICS AS SOCIAL WORK FOR THOSE WHO CANNOT HELP THEMSELVES

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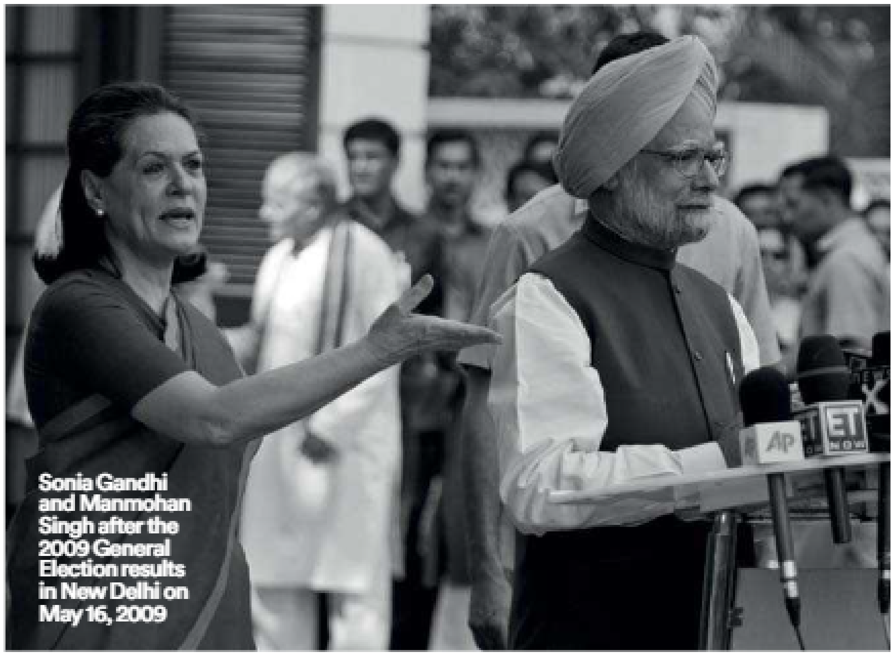
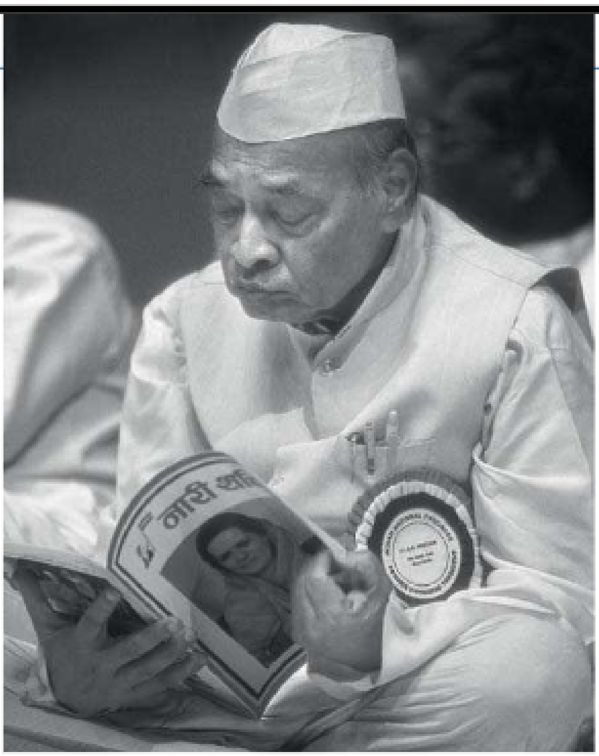


Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh after the 2009 General Election results in New Delhi on May 16, 2009 principle that India has always defined for the world. But most passionately proud citizens of the country would resist any attempts to reduce India to a Hindu version of Pakistan. That would be a betrayal of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, who gave his life for Hindu-Muslim unity, as well as of the very essence of what it means to be Indian. Congress must be a bastion of that vision of India that it helped forge in the crucible of the Republic's founding.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Turning to economics, there is no doubt that the country has moved forward significantly since the heyday of Nehruvian socialism. We have witnessed convulsive changes, beginning with the Congress government's reform Budget of 1991 that ushered in the era of liberalisation and transformation. It is fashionable today to decry Nehruvian socialism as a corrupt and inefficient system that condemned India to many years of modest growth levels. We do not deny, as Nehru's own grandson said three-and-a-half decades ago, that over time the socialist model as practised in India developed many flaws. But at the core of Nehru's socialism lay his conviction that in a land of extreme poverty and inequality, the objective of government policy must be the welfare of the poorest, most deprived and most marginalised of our people. In his day, the best way to accomplish that was by building up structures of public ownership and state control of national resources, as well as enhancing the nation's economic capacity through government intervention.

Today, the Indian National Congress welcomes, indeed encourages, the involvement of the private sector in the generation and distribution of wealth. We are proud of the role of two Congress prime ministers, PV Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, in liberalising our country's economy and in making possible so many new opportunities for our young to succeed in a globalising world. Rajiv Gandhi's tech and telecoms revolutions that built a bridge to the 21st century, Narasimha Rao's courageous economic reforms and Manmohan Singh steering India's globalising policies while insulating India from the devastation of the global recession of 2008, tell their own story. But we remain profoundly wedded to Nehru's concern for the weakest sections of our society. This is why we can still claim to be socialist today. Our socialism is not anti-growth; rather, it aims to ensure that the benefits of our country's growth are given principally to the deprived masses who need it most. Whether we grow by 9 per cent, as we once did, or by just about 6 per cent, as we are doing now, our fundamental commitment must be to the bottom 25 per cent of our society. In the long run, I am certain that Congress must not abandon vast sections of society to hanker after a notion of growth that only favours a select few, at the cost of everybody else—a growth that celebrates "India Shining" without asking who India is shining for.



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RAJIV GANDHI'S TECH AND TELECOMS REVOLUTIONS THAT BUILT A BRIDGE TO THE 21ST CENTURY, PV NARASIMHA RAO'S COURAGEOUS ECONOMIC REFORMS AND MANMOHAN SINGH STEERING INDIA'S GLOBALISING POLICIES WHILE INSULATING INDIA FROM THE DEVASTATION OF THE GLOBAL RECESSION OF 2008, TELL THEIR OWN STORY

It is a commitment to this that allowed an updated version of the constitutional idea of India to develop in the 21st century—one that has widened the scope of its democracy through such innovations as the Right to Information (RTI) Act; one that has defended secularism in the face of violent threats to our nation's diversity; one that has deepened socialism through the creation of a framework of rights, including the right to work, the right to food, the right to education (RTE) and the right to fair compensation for land, all of which have strengthened and empowered the poorest of our people; and one that has remained a proud and independent nation in the community of nations. It was Nehru who built the scientific base for India's space and engineering triumphs today. Without his establishment of what is now the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), there would be no

CONGRESS HAS A PROVEN RECORD ON NATIONAL SECURITY: INDIRA GANDHI'S DECISIVE INTERVENTION IN BANGLADESH, RAJIV GANDHI'S FIRM HANDLING OF THE BORDER ISSUE WITH CHINA DURING THE SUMDORONG CHU STANDOFF, AND NARASIMHA RAO'S EXPANSION OF INDIA'S GLOBAL FOOTPRINT ARE ALL CONGRESS ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Rajiv Gandhi and Deng Xiaoping in Beijing on December 21, 1988

AFP

Mangalyaan and *Chandrayaan* space probes; without the Indian Institutes of Technology he established, Indians would not have a worldwide reputation for engineering excellence or have established 40 per cent of the startups in Silicon Valley. Today, we are world leaders in information technology, the provision of digital services and in the launching of rockets and satellites. In all this, we are upholding and continuing the legacy of Congress, whose vision soared well above the poverty and misery that colonialism had reduced this country to.

Congress is the party that liberalised the economy, but it also has a strong commitment to social justice. We want economic growth, but we must ensure that the fruits of growth reach the poor and the marginalised. As I've said in Parliament and repeated at Congress' AICC plenary in March 2018, the magic of the market will not appeal to those who cannot afford to enter the marketplace. We must lift the poor up so they can enjoy the full benefits of our economy. *Garibi Hatao* may now be dismissed as a clichéd slogan, but we are proud of our record in pulling millions out of poverty during our rule and remain committed to continuing the effort. India will not 'shine' until it shines for all.

In urban India, Congress must speak for the basic necessities that urban voters lack, which we sought to provide and which the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has made its own USP. We should speak to and lead the struggle for better public utilities like city transport, pothole-free roads, affordable housing, clean drinking water, decent education in government schools, adequate healthcare facilities, public parks, cleaner air and improved sanitation and effective waste management. We should use facts and figures to point out that BJP's performance in these basic challenges of urban governance has been woeful and that it does not deserve the votes of the urban public. I would personally go farther and call for a restructuring of urban government, promising to establish directly elected mayors with real authority and budgetary controls to be able to make a difference to the lives of city residents.

The needs of rural India represent an obvious political opportunity for Congress: the mounting farmer suicides, the inadequate funding of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the lack of increase in minimum support prices (MSPs) paid to farmers for vital crops, and the increase in distress migration in the countryside, represent easy targets for the opposition. Congress has many tried and tested policies in response: massive loan waivers, rural aid packages, increased funding for MGNREGA and higher MSPs, as well as the "NYAY" (Nyuntam Aay Yojana) scheme to assure a basic income to families struggling below the poverty line. Critics can call it "welfarism"; we must wear the badge with pride. Our poor need welfare.

FOREIGN POLICY

When Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a mass rally this month, praised India's robustly independent foreign policy, he was paying tribute to an approach laid down by Congress since before Independence. This has deep roots in the freedom movement and in the vision of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Nehru was a convinced internationalist. For him, non-alignment was the only response to the bipolar divisions of the Cold War era. After two centuries of colonial exclusion from the global system, Nehru was determined to protect India's strategic autonomy; his India was not about to mortgage its independence by aligning itself to either superpower in the Cold War. In that form, it might be argued that his vision is no longer relevant in the changed circumstances of the 21st century. Today, there are no longer two superpowers to be non-aligned between. But in its essence, the power of non-alignment was to ensure that India was free to take its own positions without allowing others to decide for it; the Congress vision was about our "strategic autonomy", safeguarding India's independence and self-respect against potential encroachments on its sovereignty. As a result, all Indians can be proud of the role we play in the international community. We are still non-aligned in the sense that we are aligned with no one nation or bloc, and we remain free to conduct our foreign relations according to our own lights and according to our national interest.

It is astonishing to see the ruling party laying claim to some sort of monopoly over nationalist credentials when Congress is the original party of nationalism—and the political forebears of BJP played no role in the freedom struggle, indeed actively collaborated with the British. Speaking up against the iniquities of colonial rule and laying claim to the nationalist legacy of a generation of Congressmen—from Mahatma Gandhi to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, from Nehru to Sardar Patel, from Maulana Azad to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur—burnishes the party's legacy as the foremost defender of India's national interests. This should not be surrendered by default to the Hindutva pretenders currently in government.

India under Congress was also a skilled exponent of soft power, much before the term was even coined: we developed a role for India in the world based entirely on its civilisational history and its moral standing, making India the voice of the oppressed and the marginalised against the big power hegemons of the day. This gave our country enormous status and prestige across the world for years, out of all proportion to our military strength or economic might, and strengthened our own self-respect as we stood, proud and independent, on the global stage.

But we also learned that soft power without hard power is not enough. Instead of Theodore Roosevelt's maxim, "speak softly and carry a big stick", we often spoke loudly but had no stick at all. Soft power becomes credible when there is hard power behind it; that is why the US has been able to make so much of its soft power. Let us be clear: soft power by itself is no guarantee of security. The failure of the BJP government to respond effectively to China's recent gains in Ladakh and the killing of 20 Indian soldiers in Galwan proves that the soft power of Bollywood or International Yoga Day cannot protect our borders. Congress has a proven record on national security: Indira Gandhi's decisive intervention in Bangladesh, in the face of pressure from the US, Rajiv Gandhi's firm handling of the border issue with China during the Sumdorong Chu standoff, and Narasimha Rao's expansion of India's global footprint through enhanced relations with Israel and a new "Look East" policy, are all Congress accomplishments that BJP propagandists try to elide by thumping a "56-inch chest" and invoking Balakot.

If anything, the current government is undermining these traditions. After all, in the information age, it is not the side with the bigger army that wins but the side which tells the better story. India must remain the "land of the better story". As a society with a free press and a thriving mass media, with a people whose creative energies are daily encouraged to express themselves in a variety of appealing ways, India has an extraordinary ability to tell stories that are more persuasive and attractive than those of its rivals. This is not about propaganda; indeed, it will not work if it is directed from above, least of all by government. But its impact, though intangible, can be huge.

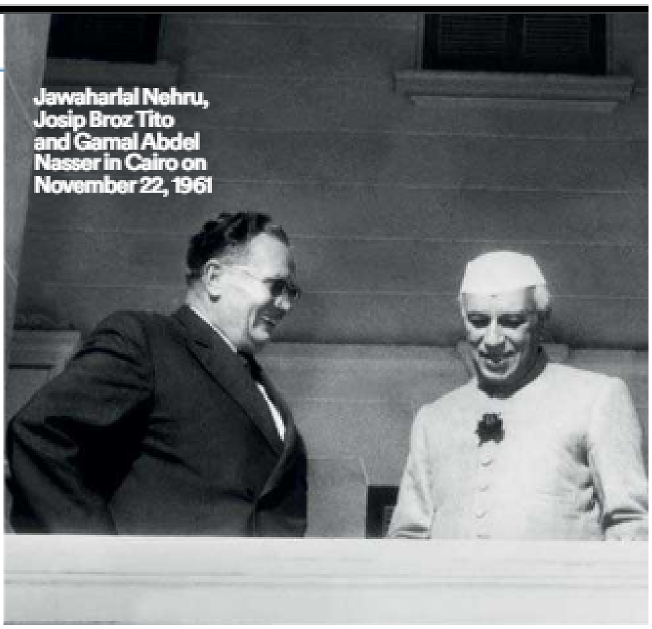
Yet, soft power is not just what we can deliberately and consciously exhibit or put on display; it is rather how others see what we are, whether or not we are trying to show it to the world. It is not just material accomplishments that enhance India's soft power. Even more important are the values and principles for which India stands, and an India seen as bigoted

INDIA UNDER CONGRESS WAS ALSO A SKILLED EXPONENT OF SOFT POWER, MUCH BEFORE THE TERM WAS EVEN COINED. BUT WE ALSO LEARNED THAT SOFT POWER WITHOUT HARD POWER IS NOT ENOUGH. SOFT POWER BECOMES CREDIBLE WHEN THERE IS HARD POWER BEHIND IT

GETTY IMAGES

Indira Gandhi and Sam Manekshaw in 1980

NEHRU WAS A CONVINCED INTERNATIONALIST. FOR HIM, NON-ALIGNMENT WAS THE ONLY RESPONSE TO THE BIPOLAR DIVISIONS OF THE COLD WAR ERA. TODAY, THERE ARE NO LONGER TWO SUPERPOWERS TO BE NON-ALIGNED BETWEEN. BUT IN ITS ESSENCE, NON-ALIGNMENT WAS TO ENSURE INDIA WAS FREE TO TAKE ITS OWN POSITIONS



Jawaharlal Nehru, Josip Broz Tito and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Cairo on November 22, 1961

GETTY IMAGES

and intolerant, unsafe for minorities or women, cannot maintain that soft power standing that is Congress' legacy and that Congress is best positioned to restore.

CONGRESS TODAY

Congress thus offers the nation a far more credible ideology than BJP's, and one that has been tried and tested. We need to reaffirm our belief in these values and keep reiterating them at every opportunity. At the same time we must battle the widespread perception that the party has ceased to be an effective vehicle for those ideals and in the process has lost India—to India's own loss. The party should not merely be seen as an instrument for fighting elections every few years. There is a great deal that it can and must do between elections, helping citizens in their interactions with government, police, and the unfeeling petty bureaucracy they have to confront daily. We have to return to the ethos of politics as social work for those who cannot help themselves.

Congress must rejuvenate itself, bringing in fresh faces and young blood into its leadership at all levels—village, block, district and state as well as national. Young Indians must believe we understand their aspirations and can be trusted to promote them in government. Our ideology assures them we do. We should broadcast it proudly and aloud across the nation.

We also need to articulate a vision for the future that embraces the aspirations of India's majority—the young. A startling 40 per cent of voters are under 35. They need to hear what we have done and can do for them. Our party has done a great deal of work in the areas of education and skill development, but not enough in job-creation strategies. We need to evolve policies in this area to be implemented in the few states we rule and advocate them at the Centre. Young Indians must believe we understand their aspirations and can be trusted to promote them in government.

It would help if the party took steps to promote inner-party democracy and a more consultative decision-making style. Open up the party to internal elections for its key positions, including membership of the Congress Working Committee (CWC). Seek the views of a wide cross-section of party stalwarts, not just a favoured few. Allow, indeed encourage, the emergence of local, state and regional leaders, ratified by periodic votes of party members. The party constitution has a number of institutional and procedural provisions that have been allowed to atrophy. They should be revived and fresh blood infused into the organisation.

At the same time, we will have to explore pragmatic coalitions so as not to cede the anti-government space to regional parties alone, as talk increases around the country of a 'Federal Front' to take on the BJP behemoth. It would damage us if a coalition of purely regional parties were to take over the visible and audible role of the main opposition to the BJP government. We are the largest national opposition party and must reach out to embrace them in our common efforts to resist unacceptable BJP policies. Political arrangements and adjustments should not just aim at not dividing the opposition vote in coming state Assembly elections, but also permit us to put up a stronger fight in Parliament before the next General Election.

THE MESSAGE

India has in recent years undergone profound transformations in its politics (from the dominant Congress system to a proliferation of regional parties to the dominance of the now-ascendant BJP), its economics (from a controlled 'socialist' economy to a thriving free-enterprise system), its trade (from protectionism to globalisation), and its social relations (from a rigidly hierarchical caste system to a more egalitarian policy affirming opportunities and outcomes for the 'lowest' castes, and from a secular political culture to one

Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in 1945

ALAMY

in which a party of the Hindu majority is overtly asserting its strength). Now, any of these transformations could have been enough to throw another country into a turbulent revolution. But we have had all four in India and yet we have absorbed them, and made all the changes work, because the Indian revolution is a democratic one, sustained by a larger idea of India, an India which safeguards the common space available to each identity, an India that remains safe for diversity. That was Congress' vision, and its vindication.

I reject the charge that in its attacks on the ruling party, negativism is all Congress offers. Our attacks are based on our own convictions about what is good and proper for the nation; they are not merely reactive, but emerge from a coherent idea of India and concern about the government's straying from the desirable course. That, in turn, is shaped by Congress' decades of experience in understanding what the desirable course is for our society, and in formulating the policies that help our country follow that course.

Congress' core beliefs reflect the values it has embodied since the freedom struggle—in particular inclusive growth, social justice, abolition of poverty and the protection of the marginalised, including minorities, women, Dalits and Adivasis. These have been distorted and portrayed as pandering to vote banks rather than as the sincere, indeed visceral, convictions they are. Congressmen and Congresswomen have been speaking out for these sections of Indian society and they must do so with even more intensity.

We should openly shift the terms of the debate to development. Where is *Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas*, let alone *sabka vishwas*? Where is the ever-elusive *achhe din*? We can point to what we accomplished in 10 years of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) rule—MGNREGA, RTI, RTE, food security, millions of new bank accounts with real money in them. What can BJP point to, besides a few gas cylinders whose refills are unaffordable and toilets without running water? The disasters of demonetisation? A botched Goods and Services Tax (GST)? A collapsed GDP growth rate with tens of millions of Indians slipping back below the poverty line? The highest unemployment ever recorded? Record levels of fuel taxes to gouge the travelling public? The shameful mismanagement of the Covid pandemic? A confused and failed vaccination policy? Humiliation on the China border?

Congress has much to offer, and the experience in governance to do a better job. The first BJP prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in a historic speech in Parliament upon Nehru's passing, called on the nation to rededicate itself to Nehru's ideals. "With unity, discipline and self-confidence," Vajpayee said, "we must make this Republic of ours flourish. The leader has gone, but the followers remain. The sun has set, yet by the shadow of stars we must find our way. These are testing times, but we must dedicate ourselves to his great aim, so that India can become strong, capable and prosperous…"

Becoming strong, capable and prosperous remains the cherished goal of all Indians. As we make our political choices, we would do well to recall the first leader of independent India and the values and principles on which he built our democratic polity. The Congress party is their principal legatee, and it must hold its banner aloft. The principles and practical suggestions outlined in this essay are by no means an exhaustive list. But in my view, they offer some pointers to the way forward for India's oldest, most inclusive and most experienced party to restore its past glory. India needs it to. ■

Shashi Tharoor is a Congress MP and one of the signatories to the letter written to Sonia Gandhi in 2020 asking for changes in the party. He is the author, most recently, of The Struggle for India's Soul: Nationalism and the Fate of Democracy

WHO'S AFRAID OF

UTTAR PRADESH CHIEF MINISTER YOGI ADITYANATH IN LUCKNOW ON MARCH 10, 2022

AFP

THE HINDU VOTE?

The anti-BJP plank will resort to dividing the electorate along regional, religious, caste and linguistic lines in the run-up to 2024 despite the fact that such a strategy no longer yields the dividends it once did

By PR RAMESH and SIDDHARTH SINGH

B*ABA TO GAYO,*" was the war cry most heard on social media in the run-up to the February-March 2022 elections in five states, including the politically crucial Uttar Pradesh (UP), where the government had been run by Yogi Adityanath for the last five years. Adityanath was seeking to make history by repeating the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in a state that had never seen an incumbent government voted back to power. When exit polls predicted a big win for BJP in four of the five states, including UP, a rash of counter-exit polls crowded social media. Most of the so-called liberal voices had turned the elections into a trial for 2024. The refrain being, if the opposition could not oust Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP in 2019, they had to rework their strategy and aim at wresting power in states first in the run-up to 2024.

That was just one part of the story. The Modi-Yogi-baiting media was put into action and vast column space was devoted to the crowds that Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Akhilesh Yadav and his new allies, including Jayant Chaudhary of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) and dissenting voices like Swami Prasad Maurya from within BJP, were attracting. Generous airtime was devoted to issues such as unemployment, restlessness among youth, stray cattle, the farmers' protest and the Lakhimpur Kheri incident, high inflation, fuel prices, and much more. Not to be left behind, echo chambers went on an overdrive: caution was urged in guarding strong rooms where EVMs were stored to prevent attempts by BJP to replace or tamper with them in key constituencies. But by then the noise had gone down to the point of whimpering acceptance that BJP would return to power in most states and the only face saver would be the number of seats it would lose in key states.

> **SOMETHING** CURIOUS HAPPENS EVERY TIME BJP APPROACHES A MAJOR ELECTION. TWO EMOTIONS ARE WIDELY EXPRESSED. FIRST: THIS IS COMEUPPANCE TIME FOR BJP. SECOND: THE OPPOSITION SHOULD 'BREAK' THE 'HINDU VOTE' AND MAKE PEOPLE VOTE ALONG REGIONAL AND LINGUISTIC IDENTITIES

After March 10, though, most of these voices fell conspicuously silent, with some even doing a disappearing act from social media. The strategy of capturing states, especially UP (and later on, Gujarat), the fulcrum of Modi's power, had fallen through. BJP's resounding win demolished the most dog-eared calculations of baiters based on caste, communalisation and polarisation on the basis of religion. The premise that widespread disaffection over 'real issues' would trump BJP was disproved decisively.

Following the election, one commentator acknowledged that it was difficult to beat Narendra Modi and that his rivals would have to work hard at fashioning a new strategy. That crucial project to quash Modi-Amit Shah-Yogi Adityanath electorally, according to him, would be "[B]est of all, have a regional, ethnic and linguistic fortress so strong that Hindus vote primarily as Tamils, Malayalis or Telugus." The project should succeed at any cost, including, ominously, turning India into separate silos based on regional, ethnic and linguistic identities. This, he suggested, was the only strategy by which the critical mass of Hindu votes could be denied to BJP. This strategy is a cynical one borrowed from the colonial era divide et impera copybook of the British.

The 'break up' India chorus, precursor to the '*tukde, tukde*' exhortations of today, is not new in left-liberal thinking. While Gandhi viewed nationalism through the prism of unity, various political parties tended to view it through the lens of caste, class and community. The Left's own dalliance with this went as far back as 1942, with a resolution passed by the Communist Party of India (CPI) in favour of creating Pakistan, based on Gangadhar Adhikari's proposals. Batting for the creation of Pakistan, Adhikari maintained that India was never a single, united entity and that the idea of one nation, one people, and one language was alien to the subcontinent's history. He argued that Pakistan should be created as a front against British colonialism and that Muslims should be given the right to form autonomous states or even secede, if they so desired, wherever they formed an overwhelming majority of the population in contiguous territory that was their homeland.

In independent India, too, efforts were made at various times to fuel linguistic, ethnic and regional identities. This, despite the awe-inspiring freedom movement that resulted in the birth of a new nation after integrating over 500 princely states. These efforts atrophied over time and India would witness secessionist movements in Punjab and Assam, the Dravidian movement and quasi-separatist politics in Tamil Nadu. Some efforts left an indelible imprint on the nation. In 1952, it was the fast until death by one of Mahatma Gandhi's 'apostles', Potti Sriramulu, to ensure the creation of a separate state of Telugu-speaking people from the erstwhile Madras Presidency that forced Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's hands into creating Andhra Pradesh as a separate state. This set the stage for the use of language to draw the boundaries of individual states. Ironically, this (linguistic demarcation of provincial boundaries) was endorsed by Congress itself in its annual sessions in 1920, 1927, 1928 and 1937, prior to Independence. This opened the floodgates for other similar demands and led subsequently to the linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956.

DESPITE THE BEST EFFORTS OF MODI BAITERS, INDIA HAS REFUSED TO ALLOW THE NARRATIVE TO BE STOLEN. THE LAST FOUR ELECTORAL INNINGS HAVE PROVED THAT MODI AND BJP HAVE THE POLITICAL HEFT TO SWAT AWAY OUTDATED TROPES BUILT ON CASTE, COMMUNITY AND OTHER CALCULATIONS

DESPITE THE BEST efforts of Modi baiters—since 2014 and even as long ago as 2002 when he was the chief minister of Gujarat—to weaken him by raising various regional, communal, ethnic and economic issues, India, dominated by the youth, has steadfastly refused to allow the narrative to be stolen and refashioned. The last four electoral innings—in 2014 and 2019 at the Centre and in 2017 and 2022 in UP—have proved conclusively that Modi and his BJP have the political heft to swat away outdated narratives and tired tropes built on caste, community and other calculations. Prominent among these is the ability to construct an appealing framework of welfarism that allows no first right to any community as was done in the past. The foundation for this exercise was set and pursued doggedly in Modi's first term. It was expanded and reinforced to include more and more sections of society over time.

It is in his second term, though, that the exercise has come to fruition, as did the exercise, in the first term of the Modi government, to single-mindedly neutralise the potency of the Muslim veto in electoral politics. This inclusive welfarism and secularisation of welfare programmes and projects served to successfully blunt the sharp edges of criticism over communal polarisation as a key tool of BJP's electoral politics and holding on to power.

BJP did not just win; it bettered its record. The party upped its vote share from 39.67 per cent in 2017 to 41.6 per cent in 2022 and became the first government since 1985 to win two consecutive terms in UP. Thus far used to flogging the anti-incumbency horse in UP, Modi baiters have had to, perhaps for the first time, credit a pro-incumbency wave for the victory. 2014 and 2017 were not fluke elections. Voters in UP had carefully chosen to bring BJP and the Modi-Yogi duo back to power.

The only state where BJP did not win was Punjab where a relatively new entrant, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), won 42 per cent of the vote, conclusively proving that voters in the state wanted to not only throw out the incumbent Congress (Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi lost both seats he contested) but also grind to dust the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), an erstwhile BJP ally whose politics was based solely on regional, linguistic and religious identities. Now, at the national level, a congested opposition space with no clear anti-BJP line-up is witnessing Telangana's K Chandrashekar Rao (KCR) and West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee (the two had been making the loudest claims in the run-up to the state polls that national politics would change radically after March 10) withdrawing quietly to their respective states.

Something curious and sinister happens every time BJP approaches a major election. Be it the General Election (as in 2019) or a clutch of important state Assembly elections (UP 2022), two emotions are widely expressed almost as a reflex by commentators and intellectuals alike. The first—this is comeuppance time for BJP. This position is usually based on disbelief: How can a party last so long at the helm of power in what was, until the other day, a fractured polity?

In UP, for example, the size of SP leader Akhilesh Yadav's rallies was considered a metric for BJP's doom. Despite past experience proving that the size of attendance at public meetings is not always proportionate to overwhelming ballot box gains. Once that prediction fails, the second argument takes over, also based on emotions rather than reasoning: a strong urge to see BJP's destruction. Things were no different in the days after March 10. The suggestion that the opposition 'break' the 'Hindu vote' and make people in different states vote along their regional and linguistic identities was part of this 'demolish BJP' instinct. The idea has been expressed at different times as a regional strategy and a 'federal strategy'.

This time, however, these post-disaster post-mortems were particularly vehement. The proposal was that if the opposition managed to take away a sliver of the 'Hindu vote', say anywhere between 10 and 15 per cent, BJP's prospects could be dented.

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI CAMPAIGNS IN VARANASI ON MARCH 4, 2022

AFP

The example offered was that of West Bengal where the "67:33 ratio"—the ratio of the two main religious communities—prevented BJP from winning in the state. The idea was simple: the Trinamool Congress (TMC) ensured that a sliver of the '67' vote—women in particular—was cast on the basis of gender identity and that was enough to badly dent BJP's prospects. If this is an acceptable aspect of electoral strategy, it has to be noted that exploiting people's identities for electoral gains is at odds with the concept of a national identity—their Indianness so to speak. This is an old and dangerous idea that has been around since even before India became independent, but that it was rejected resoundingly in recent years does not matter. However, it seems to be the only idea left now in the armoury of Modi's most trenchant and desperate critics, making it that much more dangerous.

IN 1946, MAHATMA GANDHI paid one of his last visits to south India before he was assassinated a couple of years later. In January, he was in Madras for a function to celebrate the silver jubilee of the Dakshin Hindi Sabha. The event provided a foretaste of the language conflicts that emerged a few years later. At the gathering of the Sabha, Gandhi started saying his prayer in Hindi. This was being simultaneously translated into Tamil by the organisers. One member of the audience—from the Telugu-speaking region of the Madras Presidency—stood up and asked for a Telugu translation of what Gandhi was saying. That was not all. Tamil delegates protested at any use of Telugu words and the latter disrupted the proceedings at the use of any Tamil words. Flabbergasted, Gandhi walked out. One agitated Telugu speaker walked right behind him until Gandhi had to rebuke him. (The episode is recounted in Selig S Harrison's *India: The Most Dangerous Decades*, 1960.)

Two months later, almost to the date of Gandhi's visit to Madras, the Cabinet Mission landed in India. The Mission was in India "to help her attain her freedom as speedily and fully as possible." If the Mission paid lip service to the unity of India, it administered a number of 'poison pills' that continue to have toxic political effects right up to the present day.

Indian leaders of that time ensured that some of the most dangerous ideas outlined by the Mission lived on. These are a matter of historical record but worth mentioning: the 'grouping' of British Indian provinces outside the control of the Centre; the lapse of paramountcy over Indian states, theoretically making them independent; and the freedom of provinces to review their position within the Constitution, repeatedly at an interval of every 10 years.

These two events—Gandhi's Madras visit and the Cabinet Mission—were unlinked but that they occurred in such a tight span of time spelt out the dangers that India confronted even before it had become a viable country.

The dangers were almost immediately evident. Such was the demand for "linguistic states" that less than a year after Independence, on June 17, 1948, the Constituent Assembly itself created a commission to inquire whether the Andhra region and Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra could be organised as separate states. The commission—led by, SK Dar, a retired judge of the Allahabad High Court—deferred a decision on Andhra and recommended that another commission be appointed to look at the issue of linguistic states in general.

In no time, a furious reaction broke out. In Andhra, the Dar Commission was described as the "no linguistic provinces commission". Egged on by the communists, who had been at the receiving end of the law and order machinery in the Telangana region, the language issue continued to rock that part of the Madras state for years on end. The Centre, caught up with problems in the wake of Partition, Constitution-making and a host of other pressing issues, could not take a call without considering all aspects of this sensitive issue. In the end, a 58-day fast by Potti Sriramulu leading to his death on December 15, 1952, forced the government's hand. Andhra Pradesh was conferred statehood within a year.

Matters did not stop there and, as had been suspected by careful observers, the move opened the floodgates for similar demands in western and peninsular India. These demands were met ultimately after the States Reorganisation Commission made its recommendations in 1955. It was not the first time that India had a close shave with centrifugal forces. The political ideas motivating 'separateness' never really left India alone for a long time.

One way to look at 'Balkanisation' is to understand the inability of two political communities to come to terms on foundational

THE ONLY STATE WHERE BJP DID NOT WIN WAS PUNJAB WHERE AAP WON 42 PER CENT OF THE VOTE, PROVING THAT VOTERS WANTED TO NOT ONLY THROW OUT CONGRESS BUT ALSO GRIND TO DUST SAD WHOSE POLITICS WAS BASED ON REGIONAL, LINGUISTIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

ਲੋਕ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਵਿਭਾਗ
ਪੰਜਾਬ
ਲੋਕ ਸੰਪਰਕ
ਪੰਜਾਬ

BHAGWANT MANN AFTER TAKING OATH AS PUNJAB'S CHIEF MINISTER ON MARCH 16, 2022

GETTY IMAGES

issues or to coexist peacefully. Partition of India was an example of this kind of separation.

But there is another motivation, one driven by pure short-term political goals that seek to legitimise Balkanisation. What is being witnessed in India today, especially the idea of making Indians vote along their regional, linguistic and other identities, falls in this category. The story of India from the Cabinet Mission Plan (1946) to the present day is one of moving from the first kind of Balkanisation to the second kind. Given the quiet and secretive manner in which it has been justified and accepted in intellectual quarters, it nearly succeeded.

The best examples of this kind of dangerous politics come from two states at the extremities of India: Punjab and Assam. Both witnessed inflamed politics that turned into insurgencies almost at the same time in 1979.

Punjab witnessed competitive religious politics between SAD and Congress in the 1970s. Each party, whether in power or in opposition, tried to outbid the other in wooing the 'Sikh vote'. The result was ever-increasing polarisation of politics in the state. This reached a point where neither party could back down or even try to do so.

After their defeat in the Assembly elections, the parties veered further to the right and toyed with a 'soft separatism' of sorts when it passed the Anandpur Sahib Resolution in October 1973. While some of the demands outlined in this separatist charter appear innocuous today, at that time they represented an extreme of the kind that had been rarely seen in Indian politics. If one were to use contemporary language, the Akalis sought to turn Punjab into a "regional, ethnic and linguistic fortress". In this, they had competition from Congress. The then chief minister, Giani Zail Singh, indulged in Sikh religious politics of his own. Some six months before the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was passed, he inaugurated the Guru Gobind Singh Marg, a highway linking the dozens of shrines associated with the last Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.

This competition ultimately turned into a disaster when a relatively unknown cleric, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, carried out a violent political coup of sorts. In April 1978, violent clashes took place in Amritsar between extremists and Nirankaris, a heterodox religious sect. From the next year, there was no looking back. It took more than a decade to bring Punjab under control. Thousands died at the hands of terrorists and in the security operations that became necessary. If one looks at the events of that time dispassionately, it was all due to politics based on making people vote along ethnic and religious lines in a sensitive border state.

IN ASSAM, THE gestation period for the turn to insurgency was much longer, spanning more than a quarter of a century. But as in Punjab, it was the politics of 'making people vote differently' by letting the problem of illegal migration fester for a very long period that ignited the insurgency. Unlike Punjab, Congress was solely responsible for what transpired in Assam.

It was not as if the party's brass in Delhi were not aware of the powder keg in Assam. The first two chief ministers of the state—Gopinath Bordoloi (1946-50) and Bishnuram Medhi (1950-57)—knew about the huge influx of illegal migrants from East Pakistan. But because the changing demography suited the party's political prospects in the state (as well as to garner seats in Parliament), the two were checkmated. Bordoloi died before he could implement his plan to fix the issue; Medhi was dispatched as the governor of Madras state in 1958.

Twenty years later, the problem deepened to such an extent that Assam rose in agitation after a sudden and inexplicable increase in the number of voters on the rolls in Mangaldoi parliamentary constituency. Along with the emergence of a regional party—the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)—a militant outfit, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) rose, this time against India itself.

Much like Punjab, it took more than a decade to control the situation in Assam. Through a series of army operations and ULFA's own indiscriminate violence, separatist sentiment waned. After a series of bomb blasts in Guwahati and other cities of the state, Assam's civil society and people in general became disenchanted with separatism. ULFA persists till today, especially in the easternmost districts, even if its violence has by and large been ended.

It took more than 60 years for a pushback of sorts at the mass level. Today, Indians of all persuasion are acutely sensitive to any abuse of politics that can harm the unity and integrity of the country. That has not stopped the quest for political gains by dividing people, but the returns are increasingly diminishing. One clear sign of this change is the immediate reaction to any 'counter-narrative' that seeks to justify or legitimise infractions that have a bearing on India's unity.

The latest example of this change is the reaction and counter-reaction to the Vivek Agnihotri film, *The Kashmir Files*. Until recently, this was a taboo subject. There was a quiet nexus between filmmakers, politicians and intellectuals as to what subjects were acceptable when it came to problems like Kashmir. Until now, any exploration of the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits/Hindus in 1989-90 was considered unacceptable as it damaged India's secular fabric. It does not take much imagination to understand who gained from this position. That period, roughly from 1995 to 2014, was one wherein the Indian establishment tried very hard to turn terrorists into 'responsible interlocutors'. An entire industry of activists, academics and journalists sprang up to make India compromise on its territorial integrity by loosening control over Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Matters went so far that it was considered normal on the part of public intellectuals to speak in the same breath of the forced migrations of Pandits from the Kashmir Valley and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, as if the two were politically equivalent. That sort of moral equivalence is now unacceptable.

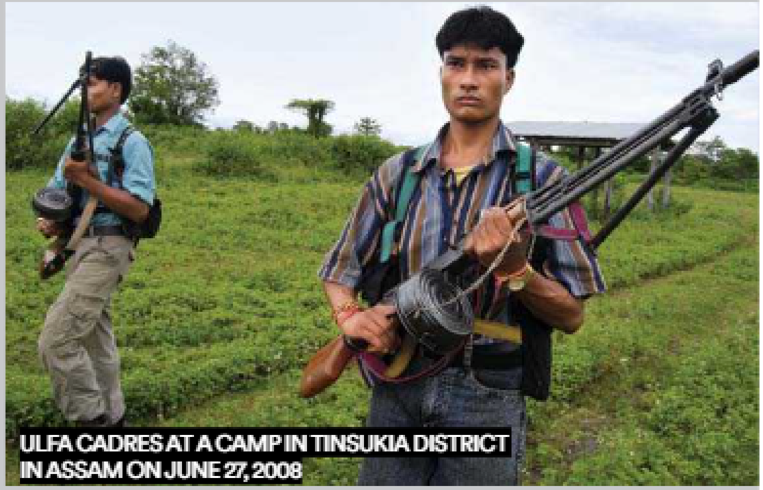
The pushback against the conspiracy of silence on the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits/Hindus from the Valley due to the violence, threats and bullying by separatist militants with Pakistani connections was practically non-existent when it happened in 1991, after the extraordinary kidnapping of then Union Home

Photos AP

KHALISTANI MILITANTS AT THE GOLDEN TEMPLE COMPLEX IN AMRITSAR, MAY 12, 1984; AND JARNAIL SINGH BHINDRANWALE (INSET)

AN ANTI-HINDI PROTEST IN TAMIL NADU IN 1965

THE STORY OF INDIA IS OF MOVING FROM ONE KIND OF BALKANISATION TO ANOTHER. GIVEN THE SECRETIVE MANNER IN WHICH IT HAS BEEN JUSTIFIED IN INTELLECTUAL QUARTERS, IT NEARLY SUCCEEDED. THE BEST EXAMPLES OF THIS KIND OF DANGEROUS POLITICS COME FROM PUNJAB AND ASSAM



ULFA CADRES AT A CAMP IN TINSUKIA DISTRICT IN ASSAM ON JUNE 27, 2008

AFP

Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's daughter Rubaiyya. Most liberal intellectuals failed to come through for the community in their worst hour of loss. Some admitted only recently that they chose not to highlight the issue at the time since that would mean fuelling the already simmering Hindu sentiment over Ayodhya and the Ram temple movement launched by BJP and the Sangh Parivar, raising tensions countrywide. Otherwise outspoken A-list actors from Bollywood, such as Aamir Khan (he was earlier widely criticised for saying that his wife Kiran was worried enough over the lynching of Muslims in India to consider leaving the country), who sported sealed lips on the Kashmir issue for years have only now acknowledged the trauma that Pandits/Hindus in the Valley went through in the 1990s as a consequence of the actions of terrorists.

The film has also changed the very way the cultural space is being manipulated. People like popular comedian Kapil Sharma have become the arbiters of public taste. His show, usually the first port of call for Bollywood celebrities before their films hit the theatres, refused to host the makers of *The Kashmir Files* to showcase the film. But popular support has ensured that the film is the biggest grosser in recent times. Enough, in fact, for the Karni Sena (it shot to prominence after it threatened to chop off Deepika Padukone's nose for acting in a period film) to demand that director Vivek Agnihotri and his team donate at least half their earnings to the welfare of Kashmiri Pandits.

The runaway success of the first-ever movie on the plight of Kashmiri Pandits comes at a time when OTT platforms are used to create new and convenient political and ideological narratives. In most of these productions, the Hindu is shown as the villain, characters from the minority community are shown as victimised by society, and murderers in serials chant Shiva *stotram*, and so on. The success of *The Kashmir Files* has set the precedent for an aggressive pushback against these biased narratives.

Since the 1950s, much has changed in India. The integrative institutions of the country, migration of people from their 'home states' across the length and breadth of India for work, have deepened the feeling of oneness. Even then, the urge to gain from divisive politics packaged as 'federalism', 'local sentiment' and linguistic identities remains strong. Now, more than ever, this sentiment will be used to ensure a 'level playing field' in 2024. But chances are this is unlikely to pay the dividends it once did. ■

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THE HOMECOMING OF THE GODS

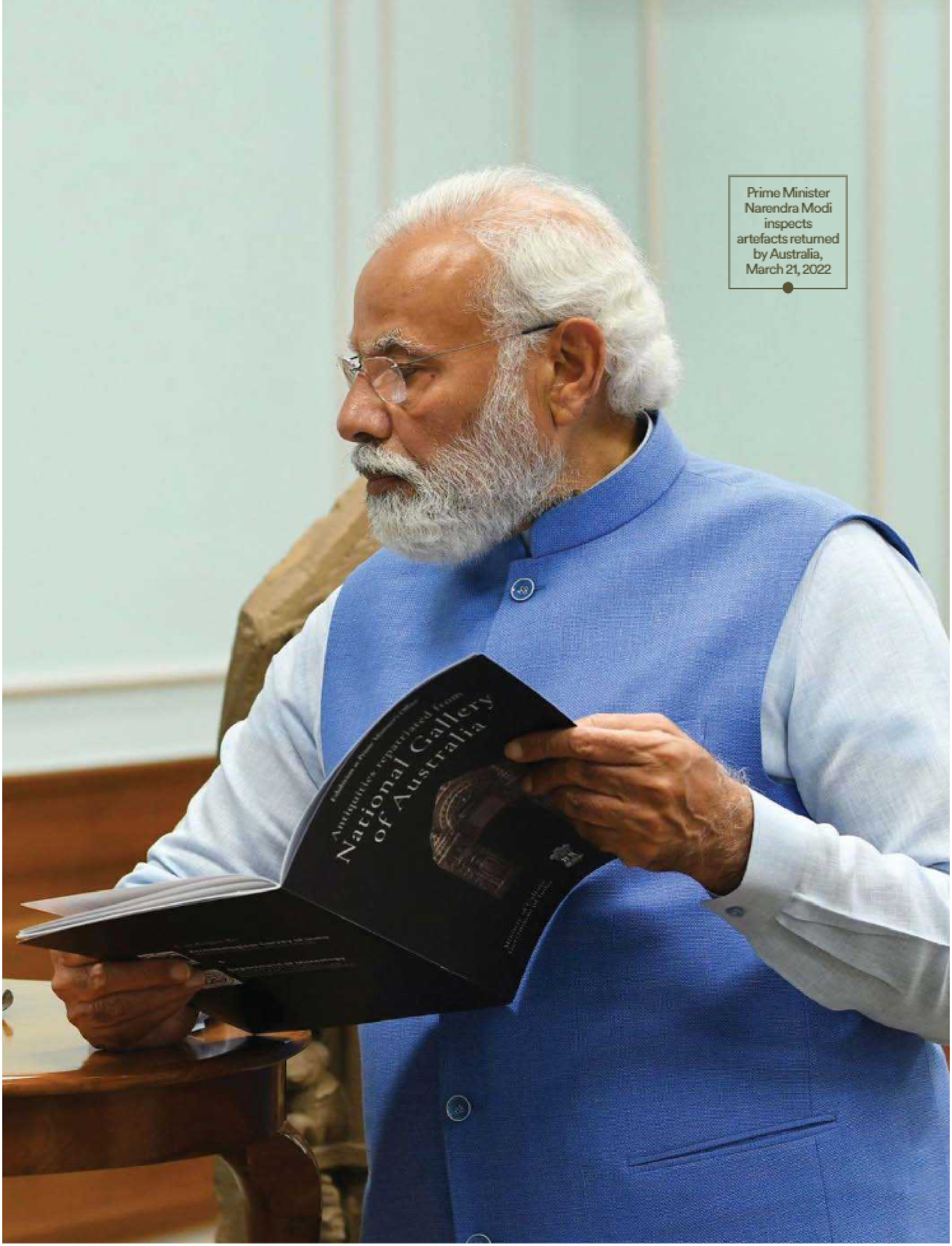
With India making requests for stolen artefacts a part of diplomacy, the rate of return of lost treasures has increased from a trickle to a consistent flow

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

THE ANTIQUITIES AND ART TREASURES (AAT) Act, which seeks to regulate export and trade in art treasures, prevent fraud and smuggling of antiquities and also empowers the government to acquire artefacts it feels are endangered or in need of preservation, was enacted almost five decades ago. In the years that followed till the Modi government assumed office in 2014, all of 13 antiquities were returned to India from abroad where they had been illegally transported. Since then, as part of a sustained political and diplomatic campaign, 228 ancient treasures have been recovered and are in various stages of return to India.

The acquisition of the treasures received a boost during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US last year when as many as 157 antiquities were handed over at the Indian consul general's office in New York. From time to time, the prime minister has thanked foreign leaders for repatriation of priceless pieces of heritage smuggled out of India and sold illegally to foreign collectors, some even institutional buyers. The loss of heritage, subject to occasional discussion and court cases, acquired a sharper and more political edge when Modi made it part of India's diplomatic outreach. Seen in the light of political and cultural debates that have raged around him, the efforts can be viewed as being in sync with a concerted bid to revive interest and pride in ancient Indian culture and showcase India's Hindu, Jain and Buddhist traditions going back to the middle ages and earlier periods,

Courtesy PMO


Antiquities repatriated from
National Gallery of Australia

Prime Minister Narendra Modi inspects artefacts returned by Australia, March 21, 2022

BEFORE THE MODI GOVERNMENT ASSUMED OFFICE IN 2014, ALL OF 13 ANTIQUITIES WERE RETURNED TO INDIA FROM ABROAD WHERE THEY HAD BEEN ILLEGALLY TRANSPORTED. SINCE THEN, AS PART OF A SUSTAINED POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC CAMPAIGN, 228 ANCIENT TREASURES HAVE BEEN RECOVERED AND ARE IN VARIOUS STAGES OF RETURN TO INDIA

Lakshmi Narayana in sandstone, 10th-11th century CE, originally from Rajasthan or Uttar Pradesh

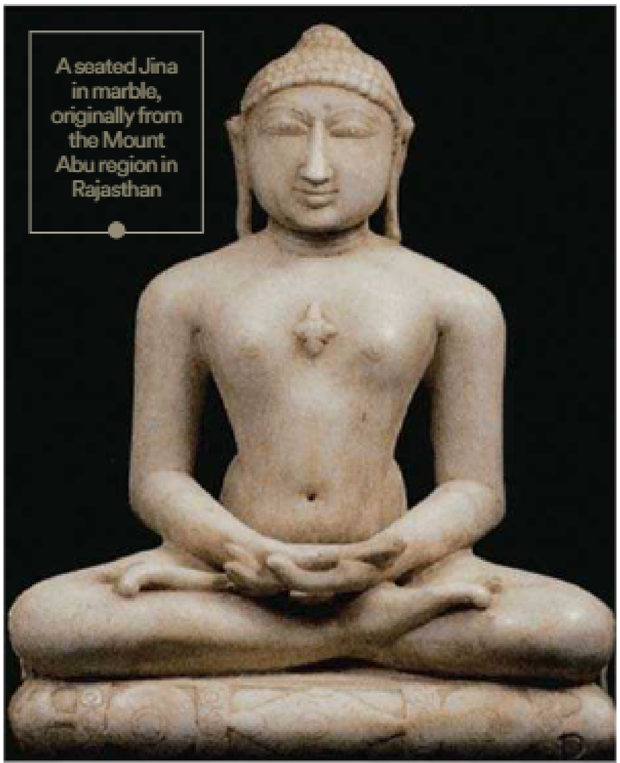
although some of the objects retrieved are also secular subjects like 19th century portraits of families, individuals and leaders.

The latest tranche of 29 antiquities received from Australia saw Modi express his gratitude to Prime Minister Scott Morrison for the cooperation extended in identifying and facilitating the return of the valuable past. "These include paintings and statues that are hundreds of years old. Now they can be returned to the places where they belong," he said. Officials familiar with the repatriation of antiques said that the return of artefacts reflects India's increased diplomatic heft and leverage due to closer economic and political ties with several Western nations (largely the repositories of stolen and smuggled treasures). The mutual desire for expanded investment and convergence over strategic interests has made Western governments and, in turn, museums more amenable to considering Indian requests for the return of antiquities. With India making these requests a part of its negotiations and discussions with foreign partners, the flow of lost treasures has increased from a sporadic trickle to being a more consistent feature of diplomatic engagement. In Modi's meeting with US President Joe Biden last year, the leaders agreed to work on preventing smuggling and theft of heritage, an illegal business that runs into billions of dollars, and where India has been a target for decades. Some of the retrieved antiques are believed to be connected with jailed art smuggler Subhash Kapoor, an Indian American who was apprehended in Germany in 2011 and repatriated to India. Several leading museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, have conducted reviews to see if some of the Indian displays were in fact part of Kapoor's illegal procurement of ancient idols and icons. Despite the AAT Act banning the export of archaeological objects, heritage theft has been a matter of concern with a 2020 UNESCO report estimating that 50,000 artefacts were smuggled out of the country till 1989. The estimates are far from perfect and thousands of cases have been registered under the Antiquities Act without resolution. The "loot of the past" theme is an evocative one, with lack of awareness, connivance of local collaborators and poverty helping first colonialists, and later unscrupulous traders and smugglers, to purloin antique troves and sell them illegally in the global antiquities market for hefty profits.

The list of returned treasures is a visual record of India's past and turns the leaves of history back to the 13-14th centuries and even earlier. A Nataraja and an Ardhanarishvara from Tamil Nadu came back from Australia in 2014, a parrot lady from Madhya Pradesh and a Mahishasuramardini (Durga) came back from Canada and Germany in 2015 and a terracotta female figure from central India was returned by the Honolulu Museum in 2016. In 2015 and 2016, three images from Tamil Nadu of Uma Parmeshwari, a bronze statue of Saint Manikkavachaka and a metal idol of Ganesha, all from Tamil Nadu, were brought back from Singapore and the US. Also in 2016, a floral tile from Kashmir, a Chola period devi and a Bahubali from Andhra Pradesh were repatriated from the US. In the same year, a seated Buddha from Uttar Pradesh, a panel of devotees from Andhra and a stone image of Pratyangira from Tamil Nadu (a form of Shakti) were returned by Australia. Damaged sandstone images of dancing figures, stone images of Brahma, Bodhisattva heads, *dwarpala* (divine doorkeeper) sculptures and priceless limestone reliefs from central and south India were recovered between 2017 and 2020. A stone Shiva, a metal idol of Sita and a Navaneetha Krishna from Rajasthan and south India came back from the UK. Pre-medieval age returnees include Buddhist motifs, humped bulls, monkey and crocodile figures, images of Yakshis and birds, magical deer, fertility goddesses and Jain sculptures. Of particular interest, given their fragile nature, are terracotta moulds and bowls. A "rattle of Kubera" and copper plates with Quranic verses along with sandstone panel of Revanta and a Jain shrine and Tirthankaras were part of the antiques handed over in New York last year. A rare female drummer, a panel of Mahavira, a child Krishna and a Chamunda Devi from central India, eastern India, Tamil Nadu and western India were handed over by the US in 2021. Between 1976 and 2000, a meagre 11 antiquities were returned by various countries. Thereafter, till 2015, countries like the Netherlands, Canada, Germany and Australia contributed to the return of heritage in dribbles. The pace then increased with the UK sending back eight artefacts (though constituting a small fraction of the hoard carried away during its colonial occupation of India) and some other nations chipping in.

Though numbering a few hundred, the paintings, icons, sculptures and images are a treasure trove of heritage and given the priority accorded by the government, the process is expected to quicken in the coming years. The procedure by which a stolen or lost artefact is returned is not simple as its nativity and value has to be established. Often enough, public galleries are not keen to consider requests and famous looted treasures like the Kohinoor, part of the British crown jewels, have not been returned despite a clear historical record of possession by Mughal emperors and later Maharaja Ranjit Singh. An argument used by Western public museums and even private galleries that the antiques would be better protected in their foreign homes has been used in the past but is not voiced any longer given that such patronising averments have fallen out of favour.

FOR THE MODI government, the homecoming of the antiquities stands in contrast to the record of previous governments, even the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) that was in office between 1998 and 2004. When Modi came to power, it was not immediately clear how much prominence would be accorded to 'cultural' issues, including ideological battles with the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) critics and opponents, given the governance agenda discussed during the 2014 campaign. While emotive issues are part and parcel of politics, they do not work in isolation and can yield limited dividends without addressing concrete everyday concerns. The lesson was internalised by the incoming government which expended



A seated Jina in marble, originally from the Mount Abu region in Rajasthan

The dancing child-saint Sambandar in bronze, 12th century CE, originally from Tamil Nadu

THE LIST OF RETURNED TREASURES IS A VISUAL RECORD OF INDIA'S PAST. THERE IS AN EMOTIONAL QUOTIENT IN LONG-LOST ARTICLES OF GREAT HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUE RETURNING TO THEIR PLACE OF ORIGIN. THERE IS A SENSE OF COMPLETION WHEN A NATARAJA OR BODHISATTVA RETURNS TO ITS RIGHTFUL PERCH

Durga Mahishasuramardini in sandstone, 12th-13th century CE, originally from Gujarat

considerable energy on programmes like Jan Dhan-Aadhaar-Mobile (JAM) and improving the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA) wage support scheme. But the dispensation also did not shy away from engaging proactively with the need to 'revise' what it felt was an excessive focus on Mughal history in academic curricula and history research and the downplaying of important figures like Chhatrapati Shivaji and Maharana Pratap as well as pre-Islamic culture. In the same vein, interpretations of the Bhakti movement that fail to sufficiently recognise elements of Hindu revivalism were seen to be selective. Inevitably, the discussion took a political turn and battle between those who saw an attempt to 'saffronise' India and others who held that the culture wars only reflected a need for correction of long-held biases is ongoing, often attracting the label of a "clash of imaginations". Though not directly a part of such ideological faultlines—a desire to bring back Indian treasures can hardly be contested as partisan—there is a spotlight on a past which has acquired new relevance and political overtones. It is in sync with projects for the restoration of places of pilgrimage and cultural life, such as the Varanasi ghats and temple complex, (but which also include the Taj Mahal complex), and are intended to connect the past to a living culture. The enterprise to bring back lost and stolen heritage is as much a political statement as it is a bid to restore a forgotten legacy.

The significance of the push to retrieve heritage is evident when viewed in the context of BJP's larger political and social project that sees a 'rediscovery' of the past, particularly the pre-Mughal era, and accommodation of lesser historical figures, including those of a subaltern flavour, within a nationalist narrative. The proposition is the counter-thesis of scholarship that sees regional and sub-regional histories as evidence of 'nations' within a nation not strongly bound by a unifying cultural process or heritage. BJP's approach to tribal heroes and much of its outreach in Northeast India has been based on its 'assimilative' views for decades but the efforts began to deliver political results only after the emergence of Modi on the national scene and electoral victories which at state and organisational levels have been overseen by Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. As with several other debates, the discussion is a tussle for intellectual legitimacy of competing arguments. BJP's ideological adversaries tend to see its focus on reinterpreting the past as glorification of myths and shades of present-day jingoism while the saffron camp argues that it is calling for an overdue restoration.

The ruling party's recent electoral success, which has helped offset defeat in the West Bengal election last year (no less an ideological battleground), is likely to provide fresh impetus to the cultural campaign. The recovery of antiques sits side by side with BJP's elevation of leaders of the freedom struggle like Sardar Patel and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose as a rebalancing against the Nehruvian tradition, just as the government's emphasis on reacquiring foreign real estate associated with "Babasaheb" BR Ambedkar is both a political scheme and a nationalist endeavour.

There is an emotional quotient in long-lost articles of great historical and religious value returning to their place of origin and residence. Any number of legends and literature—animated vividly by films like the *Indiana Jones* series—that associate lost and plundered treasures with unsettled spirits, lack of harmony and restless auras constitute a powerful imagery. There is a sense of completion when a Nataraja or Bodhisattva returns to its rightful perch. It is almost like an ancient tale turning a full circle of history, defying years of usurpation and captivity to fulfil a long-ordained destiny. ■

FEAR AND FACTS

Should India be prepared for a new Covid wave?

By LHENDUP G BHUTIA

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

TWO YEARS SINCE the pandemic, India's Covid-19 numbers couldn't have been better. On March 22, just 1,581 individuals tested positive, the third day in a row where fewer than 2,000 people were found to have contracted the virus. This figure has been declining rapidly, from around 2.5 lakh at the end of January to the current low. Just 33 individuals died. In comparison, the death toll remained over 1,000 daily for several days in early February.

In Mumbai, which has been among the worst hit Indian cities at different junctures during this pandemic, just 26 individuals turned up positive on March 22. It was the sixth day in a row where no individual died from the infection. In fact, 20 of the 22 days this month went by without any deaths connected to the virus. And, according to the city's health officials, just 32 beds in hospitals remained occupied by the infected on that day.

"I have just one [Covid-infected] patient under my care," says Dr Rahul Pandit, the director of critical care in Mumbai's Fortis Hospital, and a member of the national and Maharashtra Covid-19 taskforces. "I think I can safely say that since the pandemic began [looking at the burden on hospitals], this is the best it has ever been."

And yet, even as new bests emerge and conversations of the pandemic's endgame begin at least in this country, cases have begun piling up frighteningly elsewhere, from Hong Kong, parts of mainland China, South Korea, Singapore, New Zealand and some other Pacific countries, to now the UK, Germany, Italy and some other parts of Europe. In some places, like mainland China and Hong Kong, there are more cases now than have ever been in any other period during this pandemic. Hong Kong, before this current wave, had reported a total of only 212 coronavirus-related deaths, courtesy in no small measure to its tough "zero Covid" strategy. Now, it is recording above that amount almost daily. Even in the US, cases have seen a gradual increase of late, and public health officials like Dr Anthony Fauci have begun warning of the likelihood of a new surge within weeks, and suggesting the need of a second booster shot (fourth dose) of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines for the elderly.

What is going on? Have we emerged from the third wave here in India only to be confronted by a possible new one currently filling its sails elsewhere in the world? Could this be the lull before yet another surge?

In Maharashtra, among the first states to have registered the three waves of Covid in India, scientists are now searching for signs of a fourth. Labs here are looking for dangerous new variants, from the samples of international visitors who turn up infected, and those picked up randomly from the samples of the locally infected. With the number of cases dropping rapidly, and along with that, the drop in samples collected for genome sequencing in the state, Maharashtra's seven labs have now even begun sequencing the genomes of samples from other states.

In Mumbai, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) will soon commence genome sequencing of wastewater samples that turn up positive in the city. Tracking the wastewater can provide a quick glimpse of whether Covid levels are rising or falling, according to Suresh Kakani, BMC's additional commissioner in charge of public health. People who are infected with Covid shed the virus in their faeces, and because the infected often begin shedding the virus before they test themselves—if at all they do—tracking the sewage can provide an early warning system of coming surges. And by sequencing the genomes of the positive samples in the wastewater, Kakani explains, it also helps public health officials look for the circulation of dangerous new variants.

"We need to track new variants to prepare ourselves," Kakani says. "We feel it is unlikely that the surge being witnessed in some of these places abroad will be reflected here, but the virus can mutate or recombine, and we need to keep a check on that."

Even while the numbers here might be at an all-time low, both Central and state governments appear to be keeping themselves prepared for a possible new surge. The National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI), the scientific group advising the government on Covid-19, for instance, has now recommended reducing the gap between the two doses of the Covishield vaccine in the country from 12-16 weeks to 8-16 weeks, and, according to reports, the government is set to take a call on it within a few days. Keeping an eye on the surge elsewhere, the government is also considering expanding the coverage of precautionary or booster shots, according to reports, from the current group of those who are 60 years old or above, to all adults.

In Mumbai, even though its massive hospitals—each having a capacity of caring for over 1,000 patients—are now virtually empty, the city's public health officials have put off dismantling them for now. "We are keeping an eye on the surge abroad. At least for the next two weeks, we will see what happens," Kakani says. "The thing is, these hospitals aren't easy to set up quickly if something were to happen. So, for now it makes sense to keep them open to see what happens," Dr Pandit says.

THE CURRENT SCARE in India is driven to a large extent by a controversial modelling study published by some researchers from IIT Kanpur. The study, yet to be peer reviewed and posted on the preprint repository MedRxiv, which uses a statistical model to make the prediction, claims that a fourth Covid wave will hit the country in June and peak by mid or late-August. Most epidemiologists and experts believe this is very unlikely.

The current surge in a place like China, which had managed to keep the coronavirus largely in control through its dogged pursuit of a "zero Covid" strategy, is now severely testing its strategy with the highly infectious Omicron variant. In places like Hong Kong, for instance, many people are still unvaccinated; those who have been inoculated have used the Chinese vaccines that are believed to provide less protection; and a successful "zero Covid" strategy so far means that as Omicron approaches, large swathes of the population have never been infected and acquired any natural immunity. In Europe, the current surge appears to be driven largely by the BA.2 sub-lineage of the Omicron variant, the sub-lineage, Indian health officials say, that is believed to have been largely responsible for the third wave in India. Indian scientists sampling sequences reported in February that BA.2 was already the dominant strain fuelling the country's Omicron surge. In Mumbai, for instance, during the city's latest round of genome sequencing

Covid vaccines being administered to the 12-14 years age group at Rajawadi Hospital in Mumbai, March 16, 2022

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GETTY IMAGES

Covid patients outside an overwhelmed Caritas Medical Centre in Hong Kong, February 16, 2022

IN PLACES LIKE Hong Kong, many people are still unvaccinated; those who have been inoculated have used the Chinese vaccines that are believed to provide less protection; and a successful 'zero Covid' strategy so far means that as Omicron approaches, large swathes of the population have never been infected and acquired any natural immunity

earlier this month, scientists found that not only had Omicron entirely replaced the Delta variant in the city, the BA.2 sub-lineage also made up for most of the prevailing cases. "During our latest genome sequencing round, we did not find a single Delta in any of the samples tested. It was all Omicron, and within that, the BA.2 sub-lineage was the most dominant," Kakani says. According to Dr Pandit, since this sub-lineage is already floating through the country, it is unlikely that the current BA.2-fuelled surge being witnessed elsewhere would create such an impact here.

Earlier in March, Manindra Agrawal, professor of mathematics and computer science at IIT Kanpur—who was erroneously identified as a member of the team from IIT Kanpur that predicted a fourth wave would hit India in June by many publications—began to look, along with a few other researchers, at why different countries saw such different trajectories when Omicron fuelled new waves across the world. Agrawal, along with Mathukumalli Vidyasagar from IIT Hyderabad, has been predicting the severity of various Covid waves using a computer model (SUTRA) and is often consulted by government bodies. "A curious phenomenon has been observed: while in some countries the Omicron wave has been comparatively mild, some others had a massive wave. For example, in Israel, the Omicron wave peaked above one lakh cases per day, nearly 10 times more than the earlier peaks. Similarly, in Spain, the Omicron peak was nearly four times higher than earlier peaks. In comparison, Omicron wave in South Africa has peaked at a similar level as a previous wave, and in India, the peak was smaller than the previous peak," the authors write in the paper.

How does one explain such wide differences, especially when one takes into account that countries like Israel and Spain had successfully vaccinated (and even boosted) much larger proportions of their populations compared to countries like South Africa and India? According to Agrawal, this has a lot to do with the kind of immunity prevalent within a particular population when Omicron hit: whether it was natural (obtained after an infection), vaccine-only (vaccination but no past infection), or hybrid (both vaccinated and infected). Simulating Omicron trajectories in 15 countries across the world using the SUTRA model, Agrawal and his team of researchers tried to quantify levels and types of immunity loss that occurred in these countries.

Agrawal and his team of researchers found that countries whose populations mostly had vaccine-only immunity like Canada, Israel or European countries like Greece and Spain, witnessed a large surge in Omicron cases. In comparison, countries like India, South Africa and Brazil, or those in our neighbourhood like Nepal and Bangladesh, which had high natural or hybrid immunity, saw relatively smaller waves. "This goes on to show that vaccine-only immunity was not able to stop the Omicron infection. Vaccines made sure that the infection was largely not dangerous and helped people from not becoming severely ill. But as far as the infection and its spread were concerned, they were not particularly useful. On the other hand, natural immunity was really useful to stop the spread quite significantly," Agrawal says.

According to him, the current surge in some Asian countries only further strengthens the arguments of his study. "Places like China followed a "zero Covid" strategy. They did not allow the virus to spread a lot. And they may have vaccinated a lot of their population. But as we have seen, when it comes to transmission of the virus, vaccines are not very useful against Omicron," he says. The spike in cases across a few European countries can be explained by the recent lifting of their various Covid restrictions.

After the Omicron wave, according to estimates, Agrawal points out, around 95 per cent of Indians have acquired natural immunity. This makes the chances of a new wave emerging in India highly unlikely. "From the experience of past waves, where no new mutant was able to breach natural immunity in any significant way, if this still holds, then we will not see any new wave," Agrawal says.

"For a new wave to emerge, a new variant will have to have very special characteristics. It will need to be able to breach natural immunity in a big way. This hasn't happened so far. But, of course, you can never rule it out."■

CINEMA

LEADING L

No longer restricted to tropes, women actors on OTT platforms are helming shows and playing a gamut of roles, from morally ambiguous characters to troubled mothers

By Kaveree Bamzai

SHEFALI SHAH AND VIDYA BALAN IN *JALSA*

ADIES

There was a surreal moment on the set of Amazon Prime Video's new movie, *Jalsa*. Vidya Balan was in the room with Shefali Shah and Rohini Hattangadi. "Shefali is someone whom I have deeply admired and Rohini's range is just amazing, from *Gandhi* (1982) to *Saaransh* (1984) to *ChaalBaaz* (1989). And I had to remind myself to focus on the job at hand. Initially we were all groping. The first take was just not working and I remember telling the director the *sur* (tone) was all off," says Balan.

However, there are practically no false notes in her performance as Maya Menon, the upright and somewhat smug digital news star who gets involved in a hit and run, or in those of Shefali Shah who plays her cook-cum-nanny, Ruksana, and Rohini Hattangadi who plays her mother Rukmini. It is a rare film, powered by not merely these three women, but by a fourth as well, the wide-eyed yet street-smart reporter fresh out of Kerala, trying to make it in big, bad Mumbai, played by young Vidhatri Bandi. "There was a day when I saw Vidya, Shefali and Rohini on set, and I thought, I might as well go home," says Suresh Triveni, who directed and co-wrote the film. "What can you tell them to do, that they don't know," he says of his "rock stars".

"They're invested in the film, which means they will work and they will make you work," he says. He compares them to star students who make you believe they haven't prepared for an exam but then ace it. "Their process is similar and yet dissimilar. Shefali will text you before the shoot and say she doesn't know what she is going to do, and Vidya will call you and say, 'Listen...,'

"THERE WAS A DAY WHEN I SAW VIDYA BALAN, SHEFALI SHAH AND ROHINI HATTANGADI ON SET, AND I THOUGHT, I MIGHT AS WELL GO HOME. WHAT CAN YOU TELL THEM TO DO THAT THEY DON'T KNOW?"

SURESH TRIVENI director, *Jalsa*

RAVEENA TANDON IN *ARANYAK*

and you know there's something working in her brain. Both of them ask lots of questions, which can range from the painting on the wall behind them, to their walk, to their breath," he adds.

It is almost incidental that Balan is 43, Shah will turn 50 this year and Hattangadi will be 67 this April. Age has never been kind to women of talent in the world of entertainment. But now change is afoot. Triveni wrote *Jalsa* keeping his lead women actors in mind. Female actors are now playing characters they never dreamed would be written, like the morally ambiguous Maya Menon, who is the heroine and yet not dipped in sugar and spice. Or they're playing characters they've seen and heard of, like Raveena Tandon, who has found many women like her *Aranyak* character Kasturi Dogra during her travels—the typical policewoman who is assertive but remains feminine, with her *bindis* and little gold earrings. "Whenever I meet them, say at the airport, I ask them about their life and they invariably talk about the pressure at home to quit their work and start their families," she says.

Much of the change has to do with streaming services, which have altered the game for female actors, says Aysha Viswamohan, professor at Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. "From Sanya Malhotra in *Pagglait* (2021) to Fatima Sana Shaikh in *Ludo* (2020), OTTs are providing our heroines the platform to grapple with deliciously unconventional roles. And look how they have brought the spotlight on the Golden Girls: Raveena Tandon, Manisha Koirala, Shefali Shah, Neena Gupta, and others. It was such a pleasure to get reacquainted with the absolutely gorgeous Pooja Bhatt in *Bombay Begums*," she says.

They are also breaking the long-held myth in Bollywood and elsewhere that two women actors cannot share the screen without a catfight. "It's just bullshit," says Shah, in her direct manner, with a laugh. "I don't think it was ever true." Be that as it may these were the staples of the showbiz magazines of the '80s and '90s, when women like Sridevi were pitted against Madhuri Dixit. There would be full spreads on the awkwardness between Karisma Kapoor and Raveena Tandon, or the cold war between Sridevi and Jaya Prada. Tandon speculates it was mostly because film magazine editors of that time were almost all women and almost always in love with the male star. And it helped the men to be portrayed as the object of attention of two desirable women, says Tandon.

Samantha Ruth Prabhu, who recently wrapped up *Kaathuvaakula Rendu Kaadhal* with Nayanthara and Vijay Sethupathi, admits she was somewhat influenced by that old-fashioned notion that two women stars could not get equal screen time, especially as the movie was directed by Nayanthara's partner Vignesh Shivan. "I find it very amusing to see two-heroine films where the women never meet each other. In other people's minds, two heroines in one film are always supposed to be in competition, tearing each other's hair out, but Vignesh and Nayanthara kept their promise to me. I have an equal role and am in every scene with Nayanthara. It was so liberating," she says.

It helps that writers' rooms are now packed with women, and the sets have many more women than in the past. The rules of the game have changed too. No longer can directors get away with the kind of obvious body-shaming that was par for the course earlier. As Neena Gupta recounts in her memoir, *Sach Kahun Toh*, she was asked to enhance her bosom for the song 'Choli ke Peeche' in *Khalnayak* (1993) because she was considered too flat chested. Or as Mita Vashisht said recently, she was once asked to change the dress she had got made for her role as an MTV veejay in *Taal* (1999) because she looked "sexier" than the heroine, Aishwarya Rai.

Such behaviour would now be called out in public, and if not, would certainly be remarked upon in private by women who are more confident and assertive. Whether it is Priyanka Chopra Jonas who mocked a news report for seeing her merely as Nick Jonas' wife or Deepika Padukone who countered a snarky social media influencer for commenting on the length of her dress being inversely proportional to the frequency of her promotions for *Gehraiyaan*, women in the movies refuse to play along any more.

Part of the reason is the longevity of women actors. No longer are they considered replaceable. As film producer Tanuj Garg says, "There used to be much talk about the short shelf lives of female

REVATHI IN *BHOOTHAKAALAM*

"I DIDN'T HAVE ANYONE ELSE BUT REVATHI MA'AM IN MIND. I'M A BIG FAN. SHE HAS DECADES OF FINE ACTING BEHIND HER. GETTING HER TO DO THE ROLE OF ASHA WAS A DREAM COME TRUE"

RAHUL SADASIVAN director, *Bhoothakaalam*

actors. That ended with Dimple Kapadia and Hema Malini debunking the norm. Our cinema has been woman-centric ever since the halcyon days of *Mother India* (1957)." Somewhere in the 1970s, it changed, but with OTT booming and a new wave of cinema taking precedence, women characters have swiftly come to the fore. He adds, "Remarkably, age for the protagonist is no longer a factor, be it Madhuri Dixit, Tabu, Vidya Balan or Raveena Tandon. Thankfully the ageism prejudice is done and dusted with."

As is the fixation with catering to the male star, who is trapped in his own gilded cage, desperate to retain his youthful image with actresses much younger than them, whether it is Salman Khan with Disha Patani in *Radhe: Your Most Wanted Bhai* (2021) or Akshay Kumar with Kriti Sanon in *Bachchan Pandey*.

A Netflix spokesman says it is encouraging to see female storytellers come forward to tell more women-centric stories that spark conversations about the evolving role of women, not just in entertainment but in the world around us. So whether it is the character Vartika Chaturvedi in *Delhi Crime* (2019, soon to be seen in season 2) or Kasturi Dogra in *Aranyak*, women are leading stories. In *Yeh Kaali Kaali Ankhein*, the woman subverts the gender dynamic in a romance and in *The Fame Game*, the female star is portrayed as an ageless diva. Little wonder then that the OTT platform has more than 15 female-forward titles slated for 2022 including *Mai*, *Monica, O My Darling*, *Masaba Masaba* Season 2, *Mismatched* Season 2, *She* Season 2, *Fabulous Lives of Bollywood Wives* Season 2, etc.

The arrival of premium streaming series has helped showcase the ensemble cast with the script as the hero/heroine, says Sameer Nair, CEO of Applause Entertainment, a production house that has made *Rudra: The Edge of Darkness*, *Mithya*, and *Call My Agent*. "This has allowed creators to give all actors of all ages and genders an opportunity to land central and significant parts in series and in movies. It is also a statement on the kind of content we are now making, that relies more on story and storytelling and less on 'star cast'," he says.

Ditto with Amazon Prime Video which has an extraordinary cast of female collaborators, led by its head of India originals, Aparna Purohit. Whether it is *Jalsa*, or Balan's *Sherni* (2021) and *Shakuntala Devi* (2020), or Jyothika's *Ponmagal Vandhal* (2020) or Bhumi Pednekar's *Durgamati* (2020), they are creating a female-first universe. Added to that are *Four More Shots Please!*, soon to have its third season, and *Made in Heaven*, which will air its second season. Both are produced and directed by women—Rangita Pritish Nandy and Anu Menon and Nupur Asthana for the former, and Zoya Akhtar and Reema Kagti for the latter. Zee5, which has run shows such as *Mithya*, *Kaun Banegi Shikharwati* and *Rashmi Rocket*, is looking to premiere shows such as *Duranga* and *Saas Bahu Aachar Pvt Ltd* etc.

Stories are being conceived with particular women in mind. If Triveni wrote *Jalsa* as a two-hander with Shah and Balan, then Rahul Sadasivan wrote *Bhoothakalam*, the chilling Malayalam horror film, with Revathi at its heart. "I didn't have anyone else but Revathi ma'am in mind," says Sadasivan. "I'm a big fan. She has decades of fine acting behind her. Getting her to do the role of Asha was a dream come true. I wanted the central character to be the mother and the son. That's how I narrated the story to her, I had to convince her that it was not merely a horror film but at the heart of it was the mother-son relationship and how something as simple as love could overcome everything."

The upshot is that these talented women are finally doing back-to-back movies, so much so that Suresh Triveni could only squeeze in two narrations for Shah who is making up for time she lost in the prime of her youth because Bollywood saw her as "too old" after she played Amitabh Bachchan's wife and Akshay Kumar's mother in Vipul Shah's *Waqt: The Race Against Time* (2005). Revathi is juggling between her roles as actor and director. Aditi Rao Hydari has to now choose carefully between films in the south and in Bollywood, with the latter finally offering her roles worthy of her talent, including Vikramaditya Motwane's upcoming series *Stardust* where she plays a character loosely based on Devika Rani, Indian cinema's first female studio head. Women in leading acting and production roles will hopefully become a norm rather than an exception. ■

WHAT'S IN A MEDIUM?

Pushpamala N's photo-performances open up to scrutiny the act of dressing-up and posing for the camera, as well as the desire to recreate visual stories

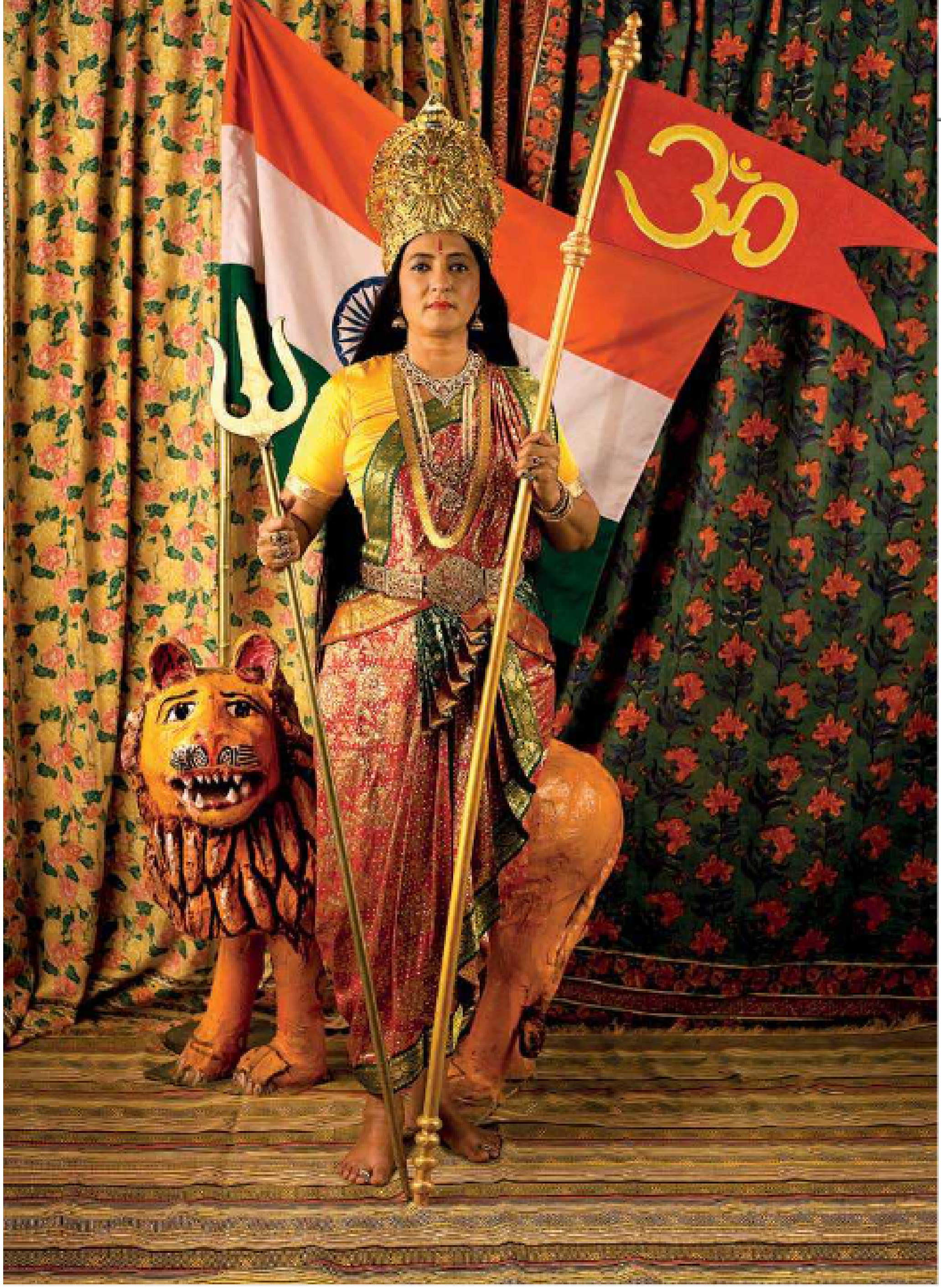
By Karin Zitzewitz

IN *STUDIO PORTRAIT with Flag, Trishul and Om Flag* (2009), Pushpamala N stands in a simple tableau. Dressed as the goddess Bharat Mata, she holds her implements in front of a small-scale, brightly painted, sharped-tooth lion, which is placed in front of the Indian flag, which in turn is pinned open on the floral textiles hung on lines as a backdrop. Layered and repetitious, every prop and costume falls approximately into the basic patriotic colour scheme of saffron and green, with liberal amounts of gold added in. Though immediately recognizable as a Bharat Mata image, there is no particular visual reference point, as there is for many of Pushpamala's photo-performances. We should assume that this is deliberate, because the artist's images include many more precise simulacra. This image, by contrast, imitates studio photographs in which ordinary people use sets and props to take on new personas. In many cases, the illusion is far from perfect; that does not seem to have affected the popularity of the practice.

As an inspiration for her performance photography, Pushpamala has cited her mother's experience with similar sorts of make-believe, while acting in an amateur theatre club for women in Bangalore (present day Bengaluru). While she notes that her mother, Vanamala, was tall enough that she often took on male roles, the photograph the artist published is of her mother as Rani of Jhansi, the self-sacrificing warrior queen of the 1857 mutiny against British rule. Growing up in Bangalore, these performances were part of Pushpamala's everyday life, as a middle-class form of popular mythological performance. The artist underscored that point by sharing with me a photograph of herself in a tableau, from her childhood, where she was playing the mythological figure Ahalya with three other children. They recreate a commonly represented moment of divine intercession, in which Lord Ram saves Ahalya from her husband, who is about to punish her by turning her to stone. Ram's brother, Lakshman, and the sage, Vishwamitra, look on. The children in the photograph are all in costume, with Ram and Lakshman recognizable by their crowns and large bows, and Vishwamitra by his huge, grey wig and beard, sacred thread, and begging bowl. Young Pushpamala wears Ahalya's white sari and flowers, kneeling prayerfully. All four children look serene and dutiful, carrying their iconographic signs and recreating familiar gestures, holding still for the shot.

The photographs from Pushpamala's childhood must be just a few of hundreds of thousands of such images: some made by photography hobbyists at parties, some made in commercial studios chock full of costume options and others recording the temporary deification of children in sacred performances of epic stories. The kind of events that Pushpamala's family participated in were clearly distinct from the Ramlila and other epic performances that have been the focus of academic scholarship. Here, we have an altogether looser and more worldly sense of play. This is something closer in spirit to a costume party, in which children and adults might take on a set of familiar roles, in a freeing masquerade. A woman takes on the role of a hero. A young child awkwardly impersonates an old man. A girl presents an ideal, virtuous version of herself.

And yet, while this tableau was likely just part of a fun family gathering, the choice of subject seems odd. Why on earth would adults ask children to recreate this episode? Ahalya was created by Lord Brahma, taken in as an orphan girl by the sage Gautama, then awarded by the god to the sage as a wife, a reward for his not taking advantage of her when she was underage. One day, after their marriage, Ahalya and her husband have sex, but then it turns out that the god Indra, besotted, had tricked her by assuming sage Gautama's form. When sage Gautama discovers what happened, he angrily casts a spell to turn Ahalya into stone, setting up Lord Ram's intervention. What does it mean for children to inhabit these roles, acting out a story of male sexual desire and female acquiescence? To find such photographs cute and harmless seems naïve, but to describe it as overtly dangerous



Courtesy *Motherland: Pushpamala N.'s Woman And Nation* and the artist

PUSHPAMALA N IN *STUDIO PORTRAIT WITH FLAG, TRISHUL AND OM FLAG*; (BELOW) A CHILD PUSHPAMALA (SEATED) IN *AHALYA SHAPAVIMOCHANA*

PUSHPAMALA N'S WORK EXPOSES HOW THE ARTIST HAS PLACED HERSELF IN THE ROLE SHE INHABITS, MAKING VISIBLE THE PROCESSES OF OBJECTIFICATION THAT SHE BOTH IMITATES AND UNDERMINES

seems histrionic. Neither option is terribly satisfying.

The photographs of Pushpamala as a child performer are not designed to yield to such questions. But the adult artist's later recreations certainly are. They sit within the sphere of contemporary art, with its established modes of viewing and history of critique. They use artistic conventions to intervene critically in popular visual practices. Pushpamala's photo-performances open up to scrutiny the act of dressing up and posing for the camera, as well as the desire to recreate visual stories. They also open up the stories themselves to questions. As a whole, Pushpamala employs two major modes of practice in her work. In one, which has been the primary focus of her work from the *Native Women in South India* project onwards, the artist recreates an archive of visual references through performance and in the other, the artist indulges in, while critically appropriating, everyday forms of popular performance. These include the role-playing practices just described, but also, more significantly, our everyday inhabitation of gender roles. This essay traces this second mode from the first two of Pushpamala's performance photography projects up to the *Motherland* series.

These two modes of work prompt different forms of viewing. In the first, knowledgeable viewers typically read or decode the artist's work by paying close attention to the historical significance of the reference image. Pushpamala recreates images with care; her attention to details of costume and material culture often encourages in viewers a similar attentiveness, as they pick apart the elements of the image. The work not only depends upon but also adds to the viewer's knowledge of visual culture. In that, it is similar to other works by artists associated with the Faculty of Fine Arts at Maharaja Sayajirao University, in Vadodara, Gujarat. Encouraged by artist KG Subramanyan to create forms of art that would resonate as critical interventions in everyday life, rather than simply in an autonomous history of art, it was common for artists associated with the faculty to document and/or collect visual culture. While each took a different approach, some, like Gulammohammed Sheikh, employed a strategy of visual quotation and recontextualization, bringing visual references directly into their works, while others, like Bhupen Khakhar, adopted popular pictorial strategies in their works. Pushpamala's practice is exemplary of the broader approach of imbedding contemporary art in India's layered and complex visual culture. Her photo-performance practice was developed alongside the growing interest in collecting popular art and ephemera, as well as the field of scholarship. Over the past two decades, the knowledge about the images she recreates has deepened considerably.

WORKS MADE IN the second mode tend to announce their construction, as in *Studio Portrait with Flag, Trishul and Om Flag*, with its contrast between the set's decidedly non-spectacular nature and the perfectly composed performer-as-goddess, her costume, gestures and props correct. In other works of this more informally staged type, the artist assumes her guise and then improvises her actions. This is the manner in which the artist began to explore photo-performance as a medium, in the initial set of works in *The Phantom Lady, or Kismet* (1996-8) series. Working with her friend Meenal Agarwal in response to the curator Arshiya Lokhandwala's prompt to create works in dialogue with cinema, Pushpamala performed as "The Phantom Lady", wearing a costume that invoked the screen icon of 1930s, Fearless Nadia (Wadia) and, more distantly, the figure of Zorro. This image is reminiscent of Bhupen Khakhar's faux advertisements in his 1972 catalogue, "Truth is Beauty and Beauty is God", for which he posed as a somewhat effete babu, a cigarette model, and an international spy. While Pushpamala credits Khakhar's playful, queer photo-performances as an inspiration for her work in the medium, her work captures this spirit most in images like the one from her first shoot as the Phantom Lady. In the photograph, she floats in mid-air, having jumped off the balcony of a slightly decrepit Italianate mansion. The image suggests an open-ended narrative—a chase, perhaps, or maybe just some fun—but the focus is on the figure, and the artificial and constructed nature of performance.

These more improvisational images offer ideal sites from which to consider Pushpamala's engagement with performance as a medium. Pushpamala began her performance-based work at a moment in which ideas about the medium were profoundly shaped by the work of Judith Butler. Butler's focus on the performative function of speech, on doing-by-saying, made possible an understanding of the constitution of gendered subjectivity through language. In her 1998 book *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, art historian Amelia Jones very skillfully articulates the broadly emergent understanding of performativity to argue that performance art fundamentally troubles the distinction between subject and object. Focusing particularly on the work of Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, she builds a model in which feminist performance has the most to gain, analytically, from exploiting the medium's possibilities. As the feminist-artist-subject is also the woman-art-object, at once actor and acted upon, in feminist body art/performance, the artist/woman's subject-position is both made manifest and subverted—rendered false—through the act of articulation. For our purposes, it is important that Jones rejects the primacy of live performance and considers the oft-displayed records of performance as equally significant. Indeed, it is possible to see how a focus on the documentary evidence of performance would only further justify Jones's point: held static, both photographs of performance and photo-performances expose even more clearly how the artist has placed herself in the role she inhabits, making visible the processes of objectification that she both imitates and undermines.

Although these fundamental ideas about feminist performance art informed Pushpamala's work, they were perhaps less directly influential on her choices than a set of transdisciplinary and transnational debates that were emergent at around the same time. One important initiative sought to collect and publish women's historical and contemporary writing, thinking very carefully about the relationship between authorship, expression and political agency. The small publishing house most closely associated with that trend, Kali for Women, also became the site of historical reinterpretation of colonial and nationalist debates about the so-called "women's question", meaning, the rolling set of issues through which the contours of women's lives were shaped by colonial law and nationalist debate. In a series of landmark essays, historians established the manner in which a normative ideal of high caste, Hindu womanhood came to be seen as the site for the preservation of Indian tradition and identity. That current in turn allowed for the identification of an idealized and reified womanhood within Indian cinema, which informed a foundational set of works in film theory and history. These scholars, which included Pushpamala's then-husband Ashish Rajadhyaksha and others in her social circle, grappled with how much female characters simply reflected male desire. The "good woman" character in Indian cinema, in particular, lacks subjective depth. The crucial underlying principle in all of these debates is the focus on narrative, and the manner in which the stories told about and by women constitute their understanding of female agency, or its

PUSHPAMALA RECREATES IMAGES WITH CARE; HER ATTENTION TO DETAILS OF COSTUME AND MATERIAL CULTURE OFTEN ENCOURAGES IN VIEWERS A SIMILAR ATTENTIVENESS, AS THEY PICK APART THE ELEMENTS OF THE IMAGE

PUSHPAMALA N AS PHANTOM LADY IN *PHANTOM LADY, OR KISMET*

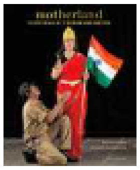
lack, as well as women's ways of being in the world.

In this context, Pushpamala's photo-performances layer the already established feminist understanding of the capacities of the medium to subvert received notions of gender over these intellectual projects, in which the capacity for female agency was being excavated, represented and rethought. Pushpamala was immersed in film when she developed *Phantom Lady*, recapturing through that persona a relatively obscure and complex moment of Hindi cinema. The creation of Mary Evans, an Australian circus performer who married into a storied Parsi film family, the persona Fearless Nadia appeared in stunt films wearing outlandish clothing and wielding a whip. Her career, though illustrious, was short. As the generic codes of Hindi cinema began to solidify, the stunt-film genre and this character type was sidelined. Indeed, Fearless Nadia is everything that the typical cinema heroine is not. And so, from the point of view of the present (or even the 1990s), she is a highly subversive figure, presenting a neat counterpart to the Hindu womanhood projected on screen.

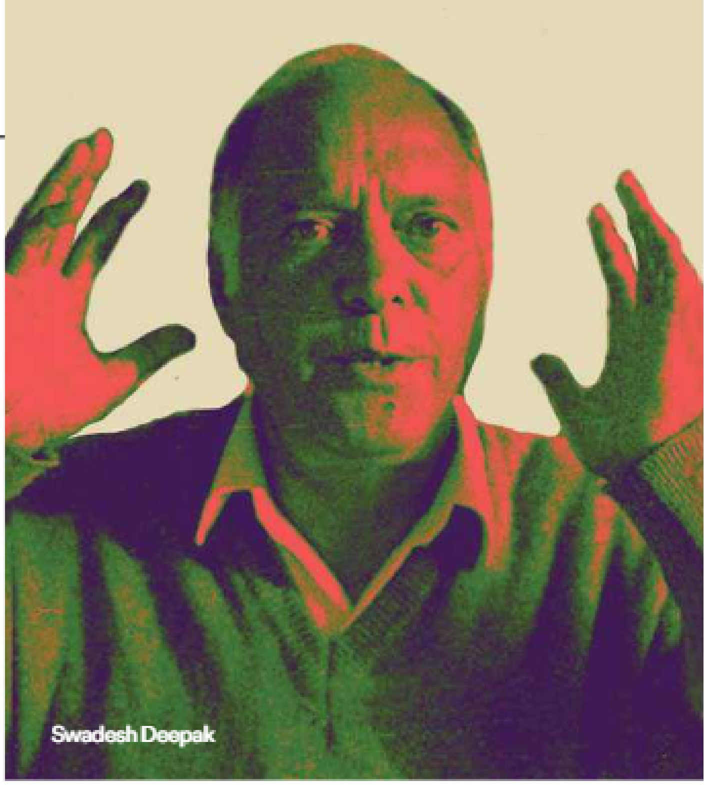
The artist underlined this contrast through an early companion project to Phantom Lady, the 1997 short video *Indian Lady*. She made the video as part of an Indo-Australian artist exchange *Fire and Life*, in which Pushpamala was paired with Australian artist Derrick Kreckler, whose work dealt with the Australian folk hero, Ned Kelly. In the thirty-second video, presented on a loop, the artist comes out from behind a painted studio backdrop of the city of Bombay (present day Mumbai). Smiling gaily, she looks coquettishly at the camera, her finger along her cheek, and dances back and forth before sashaying out of frame. Seemingly slight, the video pays extraordinary attention to costume and bodily gesture. To viewers at all familiar with the romantic song sequences commonly referred to as "running around trees"—in which the hero chases after a heroine who pretends to resist—it is clear what is being parodied. But just as in the 2009 *Studio Portrait*, viewers are given few cues to spark their associations. Isolated from her narrative context, questions emerge about how and why she is acting in this manner. It is fun and subversive, but the image maintains its open-endedness, preferring to ask rather than answer.

In later projects, Pushpamala placed film images alongside a wide array of visual cultural forms. Throughout, her work has retained its initial concern with rethinking agency, consistently offering an alternative, explicitly feminist artistic subjectivity that eschews the heroic demonstrations of virtuosity so prized in Indian modernist discourse. With this, and perhaps because of her working relationships with theatre and film, Pushpamala's photo-performance works are both very densely referential and openly collaborative in process. Particularly in these more improvisational images, it is clear how much her practice is characterized by dialogue with other practitioners, who contribute various sorts of skills and forms of expertise to their making, even as the artist quite literally animates the work. And so, it is possible to consider how her process of working reinforces the role that narrative plays in the constitution of the self. What her work proposes is a decentralized and fragmented idea of personhood, in which one's costume, gesture and context profoundly shape the course of one's actions.

What, then, does it mean for the artist to perform Bharat Mata? Informed by performance art's fundamental blurring of the distinction between subject and object, Pushpamala at once stages, takes on, and opens up an image of divine power to questions or comment. The 2009 *Studio Portrait*, in particular, finds its inspiration both in everyday practices of performance, in which children and adults participate in forms of masquerade both in and out of theatrical settings, and in sophisticated debates about gender and subjectivity. Her inhabitation of the figure of the goddess is quite precise, projecting calm beauty and determined power, but also offering herself to be viewed. As mentioned above, the tableau in which she stands is dramatically less convincing. That disjuncture is a gesture through which Pushpamala opens the image. It makes its meaning less determinate, offering the photo-performance as a space for deliberation, and an openness to critique, if not, necessarily, an explicit critique in itself. ■



This is an edited excerpt from Motherland: Pushpamala N's Woman and Nation *edited by Monica Juneja and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Roli Books; 136 pages; ₹1,495)*



Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

An Imprisoned Mind

A fractured memoir that is as much about madness as it is about writing

By Vineetha Mokkil

HINDI PLAYWRIGHT, novelist and short story writer Swadesh Deepak blazed a trail when he was active on the literary scene. His best-known works includes the plays *Court Martial* and *Kaal Kothri*. Deepak's memoir, *Maine Mandu Nahin Dekha* was published in 2003. The English translation, *I Have Not Seen Mandu* (translated by Jerry Pinto) appeared in print recently. Deepak suffered from a mental illness for seven years and his memoir, which recounts his experiences in stark detail, was written during a brief period of recovery. Three years after the publication of his memoir, Deepak left his home in Ambala for a walk and never returned. His whereabouts remain unknown.

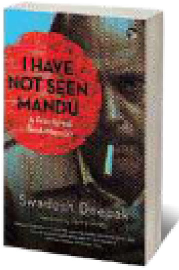
I Have Not Seen Mandu is a fractured account of a fractured mind. Deepak does not try and stitch together a neatly ordered memoir. The form matches the content: there is no way to contain the chaos of his seven-year-long experience within a set framework. He begins (in a manner of speaking) with the first-hand account of his journey with a woman called Mayavini inviting him to go to a place called Mandu with her. Flashes of memory illuminate the pages, and time lurches forward and backward in this "soul memoir". In his brief note at the start of the book, Deepak says, "since memory comes in flashes, I used the collage mode, juxtaposing various time zones…the dark shadow of this disease never evaporates."

In order to piece together his experience of seven years, Deepak sifts through the fragments lodged in his memory. He also recounts conversations with friends and family—his wife Geeta and their two children, who take on the role of caregivers with all its attendant burdens. The translator has aptly dedicated *I Have Not Seen Mandu* to "all those who have suffered from mental distress and all those who have loved them."

An entire star cast of writers and artists too populate the pages of the book. They come and go, speaking of both the sublime and the ridiculous; teasing each other, giving Deepak friendly advice, commenting on the world at large and on each other's lives and loves. Krishna Sobti, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Nirmal Verma, Jehangir Sabavala, Ebrahim Alkazi, Gyan Chaturvedi, Nadira Babbar, and Piyush Mishra all make an appearance. So does a Hindi-speaking WB Yeats. *I Have Not Seen Mandu* is as much a book about madness as it is about writing, the creative impulse, and the writer's attempts to make some sense of a maddening world by writing about it.

Some may call this memoir "difficult reading". Some parts such as Deepak's account of the time he spent at a Chandigarh hospital after attempting suicide and his struggle to answer doctors' endless questions are hard to get through. Deepak describes his exhaustion in painful detail, "I was tired…I was in a country where no one spoke my language." Sometimes, transitions between sections are abrupt and the leaps in time can leave the reader disoriented. There is no guarantee that the present will be followed by the future as expected. In fact, a section titled 'The Present' is followed by a second one titled 'The Present'. Shifts in time also happen within scenes without warning or explanation. When Deepak and Mayavini—"the seductress who is constantly at my shoulder"—are having a chat seated in a car, a woman with a tea tray comes in. The setting doesn't change. The reader is left to her/his own devices to navigate such jumps.

Puzzling, unclassifiable, and disorienting as it is, *I Have Not Seen Mandu* is one of the most powerful personal accounts of mental illness available in print. There are passages of lyrical beauty where words leap off the pages and grab the reader by the throat. There are unforgettable moments of pathos and poignancy culled from both Deepak's churning internal sea as well as the experiences of the caregivers who stand by him through the worst. ■



I HAVE NOT SEEN MANDU
Swadesh Deepak
Translated by Jerry Pinto

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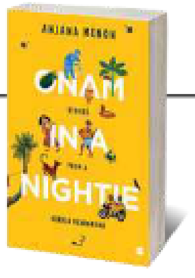
360 Pages | ₹499

Home Alone in Kerala

Lockdown satire by an insider outsider

By Geeta Doctor



ONAM IN A NIGHTIE
STORIES FROM A KERALA QUARANTINE
Anjana Menon

HarperCollins
264 Pages | ₹299

SHE'S TOUGH. SHE'S zippy. She's as addictive as a packet of banana chips. You know the kind. Every disc is a cliché to God's Own Country. Except, she's deep fried it in the boiling oil of the pandemic that has brought her back to her ancestral home town in Thrissur, one of the ventricles in the heart of Kerala. At the same time, they are so addictive you're more than content to wriggle down next to her, maybe wearing that eponymous nightie and wait for her to flip the next banana chip.

It's hardly surprising to be told that Anjana Menon has wielded many a slotted ladle as a business journalist working for *Bloomberg News*, founder editor of the business daily *Mint* and now calls herself a content strategy consultant. It's in these capacities that she appears to be at home in diverse worlds. She might casually slip in a reference to Noida where she is referred to as a "Madrasi" and it's tribal customs when it comes to the kitty party ladies and their elaborate stratagems in doling out gifts during Diwali.

When she morphs into her Thrissur mode, and people call her "*mole*" (daughter), she details the fine heft of the cotton "set *mundu*" with its discreet gold border, the exact mode of preparation of simple food items for the "*sadhya*" or offering it at Onam. It's done with such a light touch that it's very much like the unfurling of the pastel parasols atop the elephants during the mock battle of the two competing lines of pachyderm armies at the fabled Thrissur Pooram.

What makes her insider-outsider strategy interesting is that in her preface Menon describes her memories of two such events. One of the first recollections she has of the Pooram festival is being taken there by her grandfather. As a little girl, she remembers the heaving mass of testosterone fuelled men, their feet stomping in a frenzy of excited participation as the battle of the elephants unfolds. She then recollects another occasion when as an adult she leads a group of young Californian women to witness the spectacle amidst an inebriated flailing of arms. She leaves the mega tourism event with her final comment: "The Pooram to me, is a meticulously embroidered festival laced with brutality."

Her show stopper is a letter that she writes to [former] US President Donald Trump on the very night the election results are relayed across the world. Because of the pandemic her world has shrunk to the balcony adjoining her bedrooms on the floor atop her parent's home. It's her look-out tower to the outside world. Like Rapunzel, we know from her author photos that she has that mass of curly hair mandated by copious applications of fresh coconut oil, she lets down her gaze and fixes it on all those who have been tasked by the government to keep an eye on her condition.

Her observations enlivened by the line drawings of Anujath Sindhu Vinaylal recall the wit and wisdom of the doyen of Malayali cartoonists Shankar Pillai and his book *Life with Grandfather*. Instead of a crocodile, Menon wrestles with a cobra couple in the yard, meets a mongoose family, complains about mosquitoes, the mysterious ways of electrical outages and the mercurial moods of the family's Man Friday who appears half-way through her incarceration. Sivankutty is one of the many stock males who pepper her *rasam*. Or more exactly her *chukkuvalam*—the pinkish liquid of dry ginger water that is deemed a health drink. What's more there's an excellent glossary and an index to direct non-Malayalis into these arcane matters.

She calls her experience, "A slender passage of joy in a lingering epidemic".

As we said before, just pass the chips. ■

Are We Eating to Extinction?

The importance of old and wild seeds

By Shylashri Shankar

I BOUGHT INDIAN basmati rice from a grocery store when I lived in New York. When cooked, the rice evoked scents of green rice fields and fragrant woods, and the taste was as complex and satisfying as a poem. I assumed that Delhi would have a wide variety of fragrant basmati from Punjab. Well, I was wrong. The packaged and unpackaged rice in the grocery stores were not a patch on the ones I had eaten abroad. Thus began the hunt. After wading through different types and qualities of basmati—all promising to deliver aroma and flavour—I finally found one that carried the flavour. The whole house smelt of raw rice, but it did not have the fragrance of the exported rice when cooked.

I called up a producer in Punjab. His answer was that sprinkles of scent in the rice create the fragrance in the exported rice. "If you want scented rice, I can send you some," he said.

I didn't want a fake scent. I wanted the rice grain's natural aroma, which would somehow transform into a heavenly perfume when cooked in boiling water. "Soak it for 20 minutes and then cook it on a low flame," he said. I did, but it still didn't have the aroma I was dreaming of. The taste and fluffiness, however, matched my expectations. So why didn't it have the scent? I called him again and told him that a decade or so ago, I had eaten rice from the rice field of an acquaintance in Punjab. That rice was highly aromatic and had a nutty, rich flavour.

"It must have been the seeds," came the reply. "Sometimes it happens. It must've been an old variety."

"Why don't you use those type of seeds?" I asked but didn't get a satisfactory response.

So, when I read Dan Saladino's *Eating to Extinction: The World's Rarest Foods and Why We Need to Save Them*, I understood the importance of old and wild seeds. Saladino, a food reporter on BBC radio, writes about how we are losing biodiversity in jungles and rainforests, fields and farms. The book begins by referring to the world's largest seed vault. It is at the end of a tunnel cut 135 meters deep into a mountain on the remote Arctic island of Svalbard. The vault is home to more than a million seeds, a living record of thousands of years of farming history. In the collection are more than 1,70,000 unique samples of rice, 2,13,000 samples of wheat, 39,000 samples of maize, 21,000 samples of potato and 35,000 samples of millet. Perhaps the rice I had sampled a decade ago came from one such unique grain.

These wild and ancient varieties contain genetic biodiversity, which has been sacrificed to stave off starvation. Saladino blames the decline in crop diversity on the decades following the Second World War when crop scientists found ways to grow rice and wheat on a phenomenal scale in an attempt to save millions from starvation. The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Hyderabad was one such centre. Thousands of traditional varieties were replaced by a small number of super-productive ones designed to grow quickly and produce lots more grain. Irrigation, agrochemicals and new genetics forged a winning combination for what was called the Green Revolution.

Punjab, the rice bowl of India, was the epicentre of the Green Revolution in the country. It isn't surprising that the Indian government chose to implement it in an agriculture-dominant economy; the Green Revolution increased food production and rural incomes. The alternative was starvation and knocking on foreign doors. But taste was sacrificed for abundance.

In *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, Michael Pollan reminds us that we live in an age of nutritional anxiety where many of the chronic diseases that kill us today can be traced to the industrialisation of food. From highly processed and refined grains, to the use of chemicals to raise plants and animals in huge monocultures, and to a narrowing of the biological diversity in the human diet to a handful of staple crops—wheat, corn and soy in the West.

In India, we too are walking along a similar path to nutritionism where advances in science are used to break down the food into its parts to recreate that food with enhancements of vitamins, proteins etc. 'Low cholesterol' eggs are sold in my local grocery shop as are low sugar potatoes (called diabetes potatoes). These 'advances' have meant that food is seen as a thing to be taken apart and recomposed, ignoring, in Pollan-speak, the ecological web of relationships cradling food.

But the irony is that there is a longing for tasty and complex dishes among the growing middle class and the youth in India who have disposable incomes. They connect via social media to global conversations on foraging, wild foods and traditional methods. Instagram and Facebook and Twitter have many discussions on how to replicate the complexities of taste and fragrance of our grandmother's kitchens. The problem is that taste comes from the ingredients, and decades of farming that bases

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

> AFTER WADING THROUGH DIFFERENT TYPES AND QUALITIES OF BASMATI—ALL PROMISING TO DELIVER AROMA AND FLAVOUR—I FINALLY FOUND ONE THAT CARRIED THE FLAVOUR. THE WHOLE HOUSE SMELT OF RAW RICE, BUT IT DID NOT HAVE THE FRAGRANCE OF THE EXPORTED RICE WHEN COOKED

food production on a handful of plants doesn't do the trick. Moreover, such monoculture is at greater risk of succumbing to diseases and pests. Hence, more chemical insecticides and pesticides have to be used, further eroding the taste. Anybody who has eaten spinach and bottle gourd that are non-organically grown can testify to their metallic under taste.

Saladino points out that we were born to eat wild—our physiology, fears, hopes and dietary preferences have been shaped by our evolution as hunters and gatherers. But today, of the 7.8 billion of us, only a few thousand source most of their calories from the wild. Wild foods account for a higher proportion of nutrients, and very low incidence of disease, he says. The Hadza hunter-gatherers have minuscule cases of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, obesity and cancer.

Closer to home, the Bishnoi tribe of Rajasthan, who are vegetarians eating only nuts, fruits and grains, see themselves as custodians of flora and fauna of the desert. Vasumathi Sankaran, Ruby Singh and Shekhar Singh in *Traditional Indian Strategies for Environmental Conservation* describe how wild animals and birds are an integral part of Bishnoi agrarian culture. Their work highlights the complex and symbiotic relationship between traditional and indigenous communities and the biodiversity around these habitations. For instance, several Indian communities have traditionally protected the peepul tree (Ficus religiosa) as a sacred entity. Scientists have found that Ficus is a genus of significance in maintaining tropical biological diversity. Tulsi (Ocimum sanctum), worshipped in many Hindu homes as a goddess, is a medicinal plant used in multiple ways. Across India, 1,400 wild plant species feature in rural diets, including 650 different fruits.

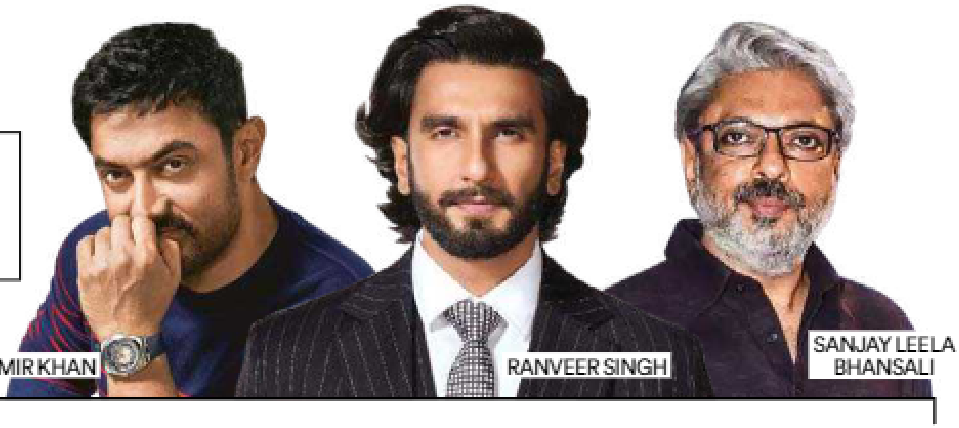
Saladino too highlights several examples where medicinal plants were given a sacred status. The Navajo tribe discovered the medicinal value of bear root (Ligusticum porteri) by watching bears wake up from hibernation and seek out the plant, dig up the roots, chew them into a paste, and rub it over their bodies. They realised bear root had antibacterial, antiviral, anti-fungal and painkilling properties. Comanche elders tied pieces of the root around their ankles to repel snakes, and if they were bitten, they would chew the root into a pulp to treat the wound.

Saladino mentions the biodiversity hotspot in India. In the Garo Hills of Meghalaya are forests of wild citrus they call *memang narang* (Citrus indica), which means the fruit of ghosts. Saving this may prove vital to the future of citrus everywhere, he says, because the very first ancestor of the citrus evolved in north-eastern India and in the borderlands of south-western China and Myanmar. A citrus greening bacterial infection has already ravaged Florida's $6.5 billion citrus industry. In the summer of 2020, the University of Florida announced a breakthrough in controlling the disease: they had found a molecule, a relative of *memang narang*.

Around 30,000 plant and animal species are at the risk of extinction today. Saladino points out that while drawing more on the traditional methods is the more sustainable option, many argue that the answer to food problems lies in launching a second Green Revolution, one based around biotechnology (transgenics and gene editing). Whatever the path, it is important that we don't let these foods (and tasty fare) go extinct. ■

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI



The Elder Statesman?

The Hindi film industry hasn't had an effective leadership that is universally accepted ever since the retirement of Reliance Entertainment Chairman Amit Khanna and the death of veteran director Yash Chopra. Producer-director Karan Johar could have taken over, but the nepotism debate has made him a polarising figure. Kangana Ranaut would like to believe she runs the film industry, but she is in a minority of one. Vivek Agnihotri speaks from the margins through *The Kashmir Files*' extraordinary success, no doubt assisted by the establishment's approval. The film has given him a longed-for legitimacy. So, it won't be a stretch if Aamir Khan takes on the role that the industry desperately needs at this moment—that of an elder statesman who can support the good and call out the bad. Aamir has the body of work and the love of the audience. So, it's good to see the actor putting his personal troubles behind him and making public appearances on behalf of the industry. So, there he was endorsing Nagraj Manjule's joyous *Jhund* (2022) with its empowering message of sport as an instrument of affirmative action, and here he was practising '*Naatu Naatu*' with NTR Junior and Ram Charan, stars of SS Rajamouli's *RRR* (2022). It was while he was doing so that he endorsed *The Kashmir Files*, putting on record his belief that it is a film that has touched the emotions of all who believe in humanity. Aamir has also, in recent interviews, expressed regret at focusing on his career to the exclusion of all else, revealing that he has used his downtime to introspect and correct. As he prepares for the release of his next film, *Laal Singh Chaddha*, one hopes to see and hear more of Aamir's voice of reason.

Prakashisms

"*Arrey jab shakti, sampati aur sadbuddhi yeh teeno hi auratein hai, toh in mardo ko kiss baat ka guroor?*/When Shakti, Lakshmi and Saraswati are all female, why are men so full of themselves?" Prakash Kapadia, who wrote that applause-worthy dialogue in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), first penned these words in his Gujarati play *Manusmriti* in 1986-87. His powerful words have earned him the trust of the difficult-to-please Sanjay Leela Bhansali, a fellow Gujarati from the same area in Mumbai, C Ward. Bhansali came to see his Gujarati film, *Dariya Chhoru*, in 1999, and was so impressed that he offered Kapadia the dialogues of *Devdas* (2002). Kapadia, who worked in the diamond machine tools business and owned a plastics factory, among many other accomplishments, loves words. But as he points out, increasingly, the world has less and less patience for anything lengthy. So, from the theatre-style cinema of the past, movies now have 80-120 scenes. "Everyone thinks they don't have enough time," he says, "which is silly because time doesn't change its pace." He is a great admirer of Amitabh Bachchan, the only actor he knows who asks for his dialogues in the Devanagari script, and also of Ranveer Singh, who likes to hold his hand during readings, to feel the vibrations necessary for his "Prakash-isms", as he calls them. Coming from theatre, Kapadia knows exactly when audiences will applaud. Now, he is waiting for Bhansali to read the first draft of his version of the 1952 classic, *Baiju Bawra*, which he calls a revenge story. Bhansali will get around to working on it after directing the first episode of his Netflix series based on Kamathipura.

Scene That

India is not quite the only nation where nepotism extends from politics to cinema. Many of the new generation of rising stars in Hollywood happen to be second-generation actors. It started perhaps with Goldie Hawn's daughter Kate Hudson, continued with Dakota Johnson, who is third-generation Hollywood, being the daughter of Melanie Griffith (with Don Johnson) and granddaughter of Alfred Hitchcock heroine Tippi Hedren. Margaret Qualley, so effective in Netflix's *Maid* (2021), is Andie MacDowell's daughter. And most recently, Louisa Jacobson, who played Marian in Julian Fellowes' *The Gilded Age* (HBO, 2022), is Meryl Streep's daughter. ■

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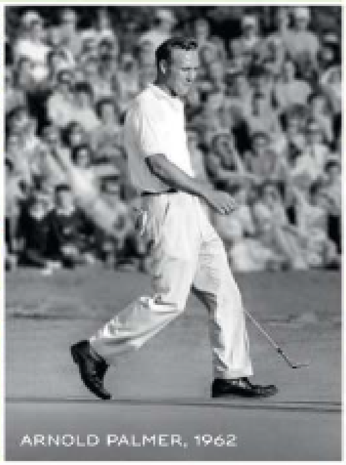
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